

THE JAMES BOYS WEEKLY.

Containing Stories of Adventure.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, by Frank Tousey.

No. 17.

NEW YORK, APRIL 19, 1901.

Price 5 Cents.

THE JAMES BOYS IN NO MAN'S LAND.

OR, THE BANDIT KING'S LAST RIDE
BY D.W. STEVENS.



When Jesse James was directly under Handsome Davy, the red-headed giant leaped onto him with such force as to hurl the Bandit King to the earth.

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CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE ROW IN CLAYBANK CITY.

"Whoopee! I'm ther old hoss o' Claybank City, I be. Don't know me, do ye, hey? Never seed a spotted ring-striped painter afore. I'm Handsome David; I be a linaoal descendant o' ther sweet singer o' Israel, an' I'm chuck full o' fight."

The above short, eccentric speech was uttered by a big, red-headed frontiersman, who had a florid face and a belt literally bristling with knives and revolvers. He was in one of those frontier saloons and gambling dens, in a miserable place known as Claybank City, in that part of the world called No Man's Land.

Being under no special jurisdiction of any State or Territory, this scope of country became a place of refuge for thieves and escaped convicts of all classes. Men and women fled there, and colonies were formed.

The scene is in Bill Grubb's saloon, where the vilest liquors were sold, and fights with a fatal termination were not infrequent.

"Old Hoss is on ther rampage to-night!" said Lew Bright, a desperado who was playing cards with Sam Swanson, a desperate, one-eyed villain.

At this moment the door opened, and a young man entered.

He was about twenty-four years of age, with a black mustache and a fiery black eye. His face was disfigured by an ugly red gash on the side of it, the scar of some fight.

Oliver Davis was a noble-looking young man, notwithstanding the charge of murder against him. His face was very pale, and by some of the frontiersmen he was called the ghost-walker.

Oliver lived quite alone in a cabin down on Persimmon Creek, where he worked a small mine, had a small farm, and spent most of his time in hunting. He was quite reserved and retiring.

His sad, pale face was never known to be lit up with a smile, and his eye had about it a strange, unnatural brightness. He seemed to avoid everybody whom he met, as though he preferred

solitude to companionship. This soon rendered him unpopular among his fellow men, who regarded him as stuck up, and too proud to associate with them.

No chance had ever been given the youth to exhibit his bravery, and some doubted his courage, because he was not quarrelsome.

"Hello, hyar comes Oll Davis!" yelled old Pete Potter, a sort of total wreck and general thief—a refugee from one of the States.

Old Pete was nearly always more than half-seas over, and at times quite quarrelsome.

He had the very suggestive sobriquet of Whisky Pete, by which name he was generally known.

"Whoopee! d'yer hyar me?" roared Handsome Davy, swinging his fists in the air. "I air a linaoal descendant o' the sweet singer o' Israel, so I air!"

"Kin yer sing?" asked Whisky Pete.

"Sing! Wot a question? Why, yer jist orter hear me sound my high C! I kin melt the rocks with my music. I'm a screamer from the Sunflower State, Handsome Dave is my handle, an' I love ter punch heads."

Old Hoss, or Handsome Dave, as he called himself, seemed growing momentarily more furious as the effects of his last fiery potation began to be felt more perceptibly.

"Whoop! I'm goin' ter chew up somebody."

He leaped at Oliver Davis, who was standing near the door, and seizing his shoulder in one of his hands, yelled:

"Hullo, what yer doin' hyar? Who air yer, an' whar d'yer ber-long, eh?"

"Sir; will you please let go of me?"

"Oh, don't—don't, for mercy sake, don't yer come any o' yer sick kitten tork around me! Why don't yer tork like yer had some life in yer? Why don't yer slap me, spit in my face, tramp on me, kick me in the shins, or do suthin' ter make it interestin'."

"I don't want to have any trouble with you, sir; but if you don't release me, you might get hurt."

"Hurt a gloorie, yer fill my soul wi' joy! Why yer actually make

me love yer, so yer do! Hurt, I jist love ther word, an' ef ye'll do me ther favor ter knock me down, I'll worship yer."

"If you don't release me I will knock you down!" said the pale-faced young man, his eyes flashing with a deadly fire, and his hand clutched ready to strike.

"Whoop a glore, wake snakes, I air goin' ter hev it at last!" and with his left hand he proceeded to shake the new comer, at the same time administering a not very gentle kick with his right foot.

But the denizens of Bill Grubb's saloon were to be treated to quite a surprise. Suddenly Oliver was changed from a man to a tiger in action.

He was strong as a dozen men, lithe and wiry as a cat. He sprang backward a single step, as if to give himself a better chance to strike, and then leaping forward at a quick bound, he struck one blow.

It went straight to its mark, landing neatly on the forehead of the ruffian, Handsome Dave, just above his left eye, sending him heels over head to the floor.

Having struck the blow, Oliver calmly waited for the villain to regain his feet before he administered further chastisement.

Rubbing his face, which was covered with blood, the red-headed giant, who had to a considerable extent cooled down, said:

"Look a hyar, feller, yer a trump!"

"Thank you."

"Now, boys, I want yer ter all understand that from this time on ter the end o' ther chapter, Noll an' I air pards, d'ye see?"

"He's raised hisself in my estermashun," put in Sam Swanson.

"Wall, he air a good un!"

"Bet he is, an' any man as lays the weight o' his finger on this ere feller riles me, and when I'm riled I drink rivers dry, I eat mountains, I'm a holy terror, I am! I climb ther Rockies, chaw up grizzlies, an' pick my teeth wi' the butt cuts o' shell bark hickories, so I do!"

Oliver seemed to prefer not to converse with him, and was turning away, when suddenly there came a flash, a puff of smoke, and the sharp report of a pistol from the door, which was slightly ajar.

The youth turned about, reeled for a moment, clutched at the air, and fell.

"Whoop, murder, catamounts, coyotes' and painters' claws!" roared Handsome Davy, leaping to his feet. "Who did it?"

A thin volume of sulphurous smoke issuing from the door indicated whence the shot had come.

With a wild shout he leaped at the door, struck it one tremendous whack with his fist, and burst it from its hinges.

In a moment he was outside in the darkness.

A yell—half yell and half squeal—came from the darkness where Handsome Davy had disappeared.

Everybody in the saloon was now on his feet, and loudly denouncing the dastardly assassin.

Outlaws and brigands as they were, they had a sort of a sense of fair play, and when they saw the attempt at cold-blooded assassination they were aroused to fury.

A squeal something like the squeal of a rat caught in a trap came from the darkness, and next moment an almond-eyed Celestial came tumbling head over heels into the presence of everybody. Close behind him was a heavy boot toe, and an angry voice yelled:

"Oh, chaw me up, an infarn'l heathen Chinee! A rat-eater a-shootin' er way at er white man. Ye onery mahogerny-skinned, almond-eyed, pig-tail cuss, yer wuss nor a cayote!"

"He did it!"

"He did!" yelled a chorus of voices.

"Melican man fool—Melican man liar alle saime," roared the Chinee, howling at each additional kick added to his person.

"Shet up, yer mahogerny-skinned cuss!" roared the angry red-headed giant. "Yer killed him."

"Melican man lie!"

"Whoop, huray! D'yer hyar that? Me called er liar an' by a heathen Chinee! Whoop, huray, lem me at him! Ah, won't I jist wallop him within a inch of his life!"

Seizing the Celestial, whose teeth were chattering with dread, he hurled him to a further corner of the room.

"Let's hang him!" roared one.

"String 'im up!"

"That's it—string him up!"

Wild yells rose on the air. Some one went for a rope, but at this moment the white-faced young man who had been shot down struggled to his feet, and cried:

"Hold—hold! Do the Chinaman no harm!"

It was several moments before quiet was restored, and then Dave went to the pale-faced youth, and seizing his hand, said:

"Yer ain't done for, Noll—yer alive. Tell me, air yer bad hurt?"

"No, I was only stunned, Dave."

"Didn't he do it?"

And Dave pointed toward the Chinaman.

"No."

"Sure?"

"I am. Lee Sing is my friend."

"Melikan man alle litee, me friend——"

"Shet up, yer heathen!" yelled Dave.

"Big liar alle saime."

"See hyar, yer almond-eyed, mahogerny-skinned son uv ther Celleschal regions, may the carnation fade from the capillary coverin's o' my head until it's ez white as an Elaskian peak ef I'm ergoin' ter take any more yer sass."

Oliver Davis, seeing that his Chinaman friend was likely to get himself into trouble, now interfered.

"Lee Sing."

"Yes, Melikan friend."

"Keep quiet."

"Me keepe quiet."

"Good fur yer ef yer do."

And Dave scowled savagely at the Chinaman.

Lee Sing returned the scowl, but said nothing.

At this moment the door of the cabin opened, and a stranger entered. He wore a broad-brimmed hat and thick, bushy beard: long, tangled hair.

It would have taken an expert to tell that he was disguised, so shrewdly had his make-up been arranged, but in a moment Oliver not only knew he was disguised, but he recognized him.

Shrinking back into one corner, he mentally ejaculated:

"Oh, heaven, I am lost! Can I fly to no part of the earth without being pursued by this man?"

His manner was noticed by no one save the Chinaman, who crept unnoticed to his side, and laid his hand on an ugly-looking knife.

"Good-evenin', boys," said the new-comer, assuming the bold, free, reckless speech of a frontiersman. "Come up everybody an' let's hev a drink."

This summons was greeted by a shout from all save Oliver and the Chinaman, and the frontiersmen crowded about the bar.

Dave noticed that the youth did not join the party at the bar, and turned to ask him why, when he noticed that he was gone.

Now Dave was a shrewd fellow, and though his brain was half stupefied with the frequent potations of whisky he had taken, he was not slow to take in the situation.

"That feller's come, an' Noll's gone," he soliloquized. "Noll war afecd o' him."

The red-headed giant, without a word, stole from the house.

Oliver had done just what Old Hoss believed he had from the start—stolen from the bar-room to avoid the new-comer.

"It's Ike Saunders, the detective," said Oliver Davis to himself, as he stole from the house. "He has shadowed me to No Man's Land, and now—oh, heaven, what shall I do? I dare not appeal to these criminals and have the detective lynched, for I would be as bad as they. Oh, I am in a gulf of crime, and drifting, despite all my efforts to keep out of it, down the swiftest of currents to ruin."

Rising, he crept up the ridge a few paces.

A form suddenly rose, seeming to issue from the earth at his

feet, a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, the cold muzzle of a pistol was laid against his cheek, and a voice hissed:

"Speak or move and you are a dead man!"

For a moment Oliver Davis felt his blood run cold. He trembled perhaps for the first time in his life.

"Surrender!" cried a deep, low voice.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Detectives."

"What do you want with me?"

"We know you," said one, for there were two of them.

"Who am I?"

"Oliver Davis, and you are wanted back at Lima, Ohio."

"Oh!"

He uttered a deep groan at the very thought, and sank down upon the ground.

Click, click!

A pair of handcuffs were on him now, and he was powerless.

He made no effort to escape, for a dark, sullen despair had settled down on him, and he remained motionless.

"They can take me back and hang me, if they will," he sighed.

"I did it, but who would not have done so under the same circumstances?"

"Come on!"

He was rudely dragged to his feet and led, or rather dragged, down a ragged gulch to an old cabin, where he was thrown into one corner and his feet chained.

"There, Frank, he'll be all right there for a while, at least," said one of the men.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Wait for Ike Saunders."

"He won't come here before daylight."

"Well, it will be too late then, for some of these fellows may find us out by that time, and then we'll have a mob on our heels."

After a moment's silence the man called Frank said:

"We ought to have some acquaintances here."

"They won't be friends now."

"Why?"

"Our calling."

There was a light chuckle.

"If they only knew——"

"But hush! If Ike Saunders only knew, his cupidity might cause him to change his base and hunt us."

"Oh, no, Jess, he'll not find us out before we get this reward."

Oliver Davis was puzzled and amazed.

What could this mystery mean? Here were two men claiming to be detectives, and yet having some dark secret between themselves and Ike Saunders.

"I wish I could get at it," he thought. "Yet what good would it do me? I am doomed, and despair has seized me. Oh, if Lee Sing knew my fate he would surely come to my aid. His cunning, steady hand, noiseless tread, and keen knife would liberate me."

But Lee Sing came not.

Then Oliver remembered that Dave, or Old Hoss, had promised him he would help him if he ever got in trouble.

Would he come now?

His meditations were at this instant interrupted by a wild shout, and the sharp report of a pistol.

The man called Frank sprang to his feet with an expression of uneasiness.

The night was so dark that Oliver could not see his features, but he knew that they must be pale.

"What does that mean?" he heard him ask.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang! came three shots.

"They are fighting over there," said Jesse.

Shouts, yells and shots were heard for a moment or two longer, and then came the rapid tramp of feet.

With the prisoner between them, they hurried from the house and went up the side of the hill to some trees.

There came a clatter of horse's feet, and a horseman was on them.

"It's the detective," whispered Jesse.

At this moment wild yells were heard near.

"Lead ther way, yer merhogany-skinned, almond-eyed, pig-tailed heathen Chinee, or chaw me up fer bufler meat ef I don't rub yer out!"

That was Old Hoss' voice, and he was not far away; with others he was coming to the rescue.

Oliver's heart gave a wild bound, and hope once more took possession of his soul.

"Come on, come on! We must get away from here at once," cried the detective. "Bring him on, Jackson and Milstead, bring him on!"

Then, before he hardly knew it, the unfortunate prisoner was seized and hurried away through the thicket.

CHAPTER II.

OLIVER AND MINNIE.

A blinding flash and stunning report suddenly put an end to the flight.

The detective's horse reared in the air, made one wild, spasmodic bound, and fell dead to the earth.

"Hurrah fur snakes! Go in, Lemons!" roared Handsome Davy.

There was no time for any preconcerted plan.

Ike Saunders knew that had he fallen into an arena of hungry lions he could not be in more danger.

He retained his presence of mind enough to slip his feet from his stirrups, as his horse went down, and make one desperate plunge for his life.

All thought of the prisoner and the handsome reward he was offered for his capture now gave place to the all-absorbing idea of saving his life. What was reward, honor and fame to him who was in the most deadly peril that could menace a man?

Oliver found himself dragged he knew not where.

There was a rush of feet, a rattling crash of firearms.

He felt a stunning blow on the head.

Shouts, yells and all the horrible sounds of conflict were heard all about him.

He was not knocked senseless, but stunned, confused and bewildered. He found himself running.

He knew not which course he was taking, nor whither he went, but blindly stumbling along, he ran until he fell.

Down, down, down he went until he struck among some logs drifted by the high waters into the bottom of the creek, which was now almost dry.

Having handcuffs on his wrists, he was unable to catch himself or stay his fall, and though he did not fall any great distance, the shock was sufficient to render him insensible.

When he regained his sensibilities he felt a soft hand passing over his face, and heard a low, sweet, musical voice saying:

"No, he is not dead. He is not dead, he begins to revive."

The broad-faced moon had risen above the tree tops, and was now shedding a halo of light upon the earth.

"Are you better?" asked the same low, sweet voice.

He turned his eyes upward and beheld a young girl, who could not be to exceed sixteen years of age, bending over him.

At first he could only see a pair of great, dark eyes gleam out from masses of raven black hair, and then saw the beautiful face.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Minnie Potter."

"Old Pete Potter's girl?"

"I am."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was going home and came this way. What ails you? Your hands are chained together."
 "They took me and chained my hands," he answered.
 "Who?"
 "They were strangers."
 "Detectives?" she asked.
 "Yes."
 "Then you, too, came here to escape them?"
 "I did."

For several moments Minnie Potter was silent. All her life she had been accustomed only to criminals, and had been taught early in her life to dread detectives.

"Oh, why are there detectives in the world?" she asked. "Oh, I hate 'em! I wish I could kill 'em all!"

Oliver had no time to instruct her in the laws of moral rights and ethics, so he said:

"Minnie, will you help me?"
 "To get away from the detectives?"
 "Yes."
 "You bet your life I will!"
 "Then help me to some place where I can hide."
 "Come along."
 "Where will you take me?"
 "To our house."
 "Won't your father tell on me?"
 "No."

She conducted him along a narrow, steep path through a dense wood, and when they were over the hill he saw a small cabin.

It was not over a fourth of a mile from Claybank City. When they had reached it he was still weak and dizzy. The girl found an old file, and proceeded to cut off the handcuffs. "Minnie, you are a very kind, brave girl," said Oliver. At this moment a noise was heard up on the hill. "What's that?" whispered the girl.

"Some one is coming."
 "Move on thar, yer almond-eyed, merhogany-skinned rice eater!" growled a brusque, rough voice, "er chaw me up fer buffler meat ef ye'll ever eat rats on toast ergin."

"It's Old Hoss," said the youth. "He is coming this way."

At this moment the cautious tread of the wooden-soled shoes of the Chinaman could be heard, and a moment later his dusky face was in the door.

"What is it, Lee?" asked Oliver.
 "Mellikan man better git!"
 "Are they coming?"
 "Detectives talkee too much with Swanson."
 "Thar, I knowed it!" said the red-headed giant, striking the palm of his hand hard against the butt of his rifle. "That air big, one-eyed thief ain't never ter be trusted at all!"
 "I must not stay any longer," said Oliver.

He took up the weapons which Minnie had brought, and a despairing sigh escaped his lips as he leaped from the door, the rifle in his hand, and darted into the woods.

"Stop there!" called a voice.
 "Halt!"
 Bang!
 A bullet hummed through the air, but he paid no heed to it. Dashing down a steep, rugged path, he did not look to see who followed.

"Hold on thar, or chaw me up fer buffler meat ef I don't let a streak o' daylight through some o' yer!" yelled Handsome Davy.

Bang!
 "Now, do that agin, an' ye'll hev the only original linoal descendant o' the sweet singer o' Israel roused, an' chaw me up ef I don't eat mountains and drink rivers dry!"

For a moment Oliver paused in his mad flight. It was not fair that he should run away from his friend and leave him in distress.

"Run faster, Mellikan man. De bad mans come belly quick!" whispered Lee.

"Lee?"
 "Yesse."
 "Are you going to stand by me?"
 "Lee Sing stay by Mellikan man alle day alle night."
 "Yon will be hung."
 "Hangee Lee Sing uppe tree, he stay by Mellikan man alle saine. Alle lightey, go ahead."

For half an hour he ran further down the wood, and then, believing he was temporarily safe, he halted in the wood, and seating himself on a log, laid his rifle across his lap.

The fireless little Celestial was by his side, apparently as fresh as before he attempted to follow his white friend.

It was now broad daylight, and the fugitive was thinking about going from the spot where he had been resting, when the Celestial suddenly touched his arm.

"What do you see, Lee?"
 He shook his head.
 "Heard?"

This was in a whisper. Then Lee, by innumerable pantomimic signs and motions, indicated that some one was approaching.

They crept to one side and squatted behind a big stump, from the top of which a giant tree had been torn by a recent cyclone and lay on the ground.

A few moments later Oliver and his companion saw three men creeping from the woods.

They came down to the very spot where he had paused so long, and halted.

One was Sam Swanson, the one-eyed renegade at Claybank, and the others the men who had had Oliver a prisoner the night before.

"Well, boys, I'd a-never thought o' findin' you here, turned detectives, too," said Swanson.

"Well, we are only detectives in this case," said the big man whom Ike Saunders had called Jackson, but whom the slender man called Jesse.

"Ain't it slippery?"
 "I don't know why!"
 "Is Saunders onto you?"
 "Oh, no!"

"Ha, ha, ha! So you've got the wool pulled over his eyes, hev you?"

"Bet we have!"
 "Well, that's good fur you, Jess and Frank, fur I kin tell yer he's a slick one. He's one o' Pinkerton's cutest rascals."

"Cute as he is, he was taken in this time!" returned the tall, slender man known as Frank. "He little dreams who we are. Did he know that we were Frank and Jesse James, I guess he would be astounded."

"Frank and Jesse James!" thought Oliver Davis, and he almost started from his hiding place.

But the faithful Chinaman at his side touched his arm, and whispered so low that even the fugitive could scarce hear a word he said:

"No muchee talkee now. Dey too close—hearee allee slay."
 The youth recovered his presence of mind in a moment, and became motionless and silent, as if he had been carved out of stone.

"As I was saying," resumed Frank, "we are playing detective. This fellow, Oliver Davis, is wanted in Ohio by a rich man, who is going to hang him. We saw a reward of one hundred thousand dollars for him, and we came out here in disguise, learned he was here, and then, under names of Jackson and Milstead, we negotiated with Ike Saunders to help capture him for half the reward. We'll give you ten thousand dollars to help us, will you?"

"Yes, I'll get all our boys to help."
 "But do you think you can keep him from making his escape?"
 "Yes, every road an' path from No Man's Land is guarded, and he'll sure be tuk in by some o' our boys afore he kin git out."

"Then they are all on our side?"
 "Our side! Why, ten dollars will buy any o' 'em! They don't like Ol or Noll, as some call him, nohow, and they'd jest as soon see him swung up as not. But, Jess, why not tell 'em that you are Jesse James, the bandit king of America, and that this is Frank James, and the boys 'll welcome you. Everybody here has heard on yer, and they spend more'n half ther time a-layin' eround tellin' stories o' the James Boys."

"It wouldn't do!" said Jesse.

"Why?"
 "The moment that Ike Saunders learned that I was Jesse James, and that this was my brother Frank, then he would turn to hunting us."

"Hang 'im—shoot 'im!"
 "No, it wouldn't do. We must have the reward, and we've got to get it through him."
 "Well, that's so."

"Our only plan is, as you see, to work with him, and for the present we must be detectives."

"But the boys don't like detectives a bit."
 "I know it, but they must in this case."
 From his hiding place the fugitive silently uttered a sigh of relief.

"So a part of the mystery is revealed," he thought, as he and the Chinaman stole away. "These two precious scoundrels are the famous Missouri bandits, Frank and Jesse James, and they have turned detectives. My plans will have to undergo a change."

CHAPTER III.

OLD PETE'S BULLDOG.

"Say, boys, hic, I'm ready ter give three cheers, hic, hurrah for Swanson!" yelled an old ragamuffin who had been for the last hour in Bill Grubbs' saloon.

"Whisky Pete, why don't ye go over ter ther other range an'

not be er hangin' erroun' hyar?" demanded Bill Grubbs, the proprietor.

"Fell out wi' 'em over thar, Bill. Had er row, hic. I'm er total wreck, a total wreck."

"Pete, yer out o' money, can't git any more credit, an' that's why yer came hyar," said Bill.

"Tain't so, Bill!"

"Yes, 'tis."

"Beg yer parding, Bill, but yer laborin' under the slightest bit o' a mistake," and old Whisky Pete, who indeed looked like a total wreck, staggered forward toward the counter.

"Why ain't yer out a-helpin' Swanson an' ther boys cotch him. Oh, they says how thar's er heap o' money fur the job."

"Hurrah fur Swanson, that's wot I say. Less all turn in an' 'lect Swanson ter Congress!"

Some one at this moment ran against old Whisky Pete and pushed him into one corner, where he fell on a chair, crying:

"Total wreck—total wreck!"

At this moment Swanson leaped into the room, his single eye blazing with excitement.

It was nearly noon of the day after the events related in our last chapter, and all Claybank City was changed.

Instead of being enemies of the detectives, they were their sworn friends. A few dollars in money scattered out among them had done the work, and they were now ready for anything they wanted done.

"Wall, Swanson," cried the crowd, as the one-eyed scoundrel leaped into the room.

"We're played."

"Wot?"

"Played fur suckers!"

"'Splain yerself, Swanson," cried Bill.

"Yas, that's wot I say," roared old Whisky Pete, starting up.

"'Splain yerself a mite——"

"Set down, Pete!"

And some one pushed him back in the chair, where he gave vent to his favorite expression:

"Total wreck—er total wreck!"

"Now, Sam, how air it?"

"They've licked our boys."

"Who?"

"Ol, an' his gang."

"Who's with Ol?"

"Old Hoss, fur one."

"That's a hoss on us, then," said Whisky Pete, "fur he's a hoss, sure nuff!"

"Who else?"

"The Chinaman."

"A pig-tailed Chinaman! String 'im up—string 'im up!" roared Old Pete, starting up from his seat.

"Set down, Pete!" and Buck Bragg gave him a push which sent the old inebriate sprawling into the old chair.

"Oh, total wreck—total wreck!" groaned Whisky Pete.

"Now, boys, we've got to all turn out an' hunt 'em down!" cried Swanson. "We must not let any grass grow under our feet."

"How much'll they give?"

"Twenty dollars apiece. They pretty nearly rubbed out one o' them fellers, but they got away. Remember, boys, it air twenty dollars to every man."

Twenty dollars to every man! What an immense sum twenty dollars seemed to those poor wretches, who lived in a starving country in an almost starving state, where there was little traffic and less money.

But those grim, desperate men all had some dim recollection of pleasanter days, when they had seen money and knew something of society, the right to which they had forfeited.

It was with a thrill of pleasure they received the intelligence. Twenty dollars a head would make the little community quite rich.

"Wall, boys," said Buck Bragg, his dark eyes flashing fire, and his swarthy face convulsed with a smile, "it's er streak o' luck, an' no mistake. Haven't struck pay dirt afore in a long time!"

Old Whisky Pete rose and offered to treat. When it was ascertained that he still had some silver left, the crowd cheered the old fellow and gathered round the bar, where Bill Grubbs issued to them the vilest of the vile whisky.

Scarce had they finished their potations and turned from the bar, ere there came a clatter of horse's hoofs, and a man galloped up to the door.

"All right, boys, it air the detective," cried Swanson.

It was Ike Saunders, who flung himself from his reeking steed and entered the saloon.

"It's all right," said Swanson. "I made it all right here with the boys; and now, ez it air none o' us yer arter, we're willin' ter turn out an' help yer ter captur' 'im."

"Very well, boys. I am particularly glad, for I will need you all," said Saunders. "They are reinforced up among the hills, and they fight."

"Fight—hic—whoop! Who says fight?" yelled Whisky Pete.

"Shet up, Pete!" thundered Lem Bright, and he hurled Pete into a further corner.

"Total wreck—total wreck!" groaned Whisky Pete, dropping down in a chair, his fiery nose gleaming through the tobacco smoke like a star on a foggy night.

"Yes, boys, you will have to arm yourselves pretty well, for it seems that this young rascal has gathered his friends about him, and they will show fight."

"Bet they will!"

"We'll be too much for 'em, though!"

"Oh, we'll wipe off the countenance o' ther earth with 'em, see ef we don't!"

"It'll not be easy done."

"Bet yer life 'twon't!" cried old Pete, rising up and making a circuit about the room. "Holy terrors—holy terrors!"

"Arm as soon as possible, boys, and let's get after them!" cried Ike.

In a few moments every man had gun and revolver, save old Whisky Pete, who halted to take another drink, and all set off after the fugitive.

Some were on foot and some on horseback.

No Man's Land is mostly prairie, though there is considerable timber in the northern part, which is quite hilly.

Even at the present writing it is a wilderness, and the haunt of the fugitive from justice.

The author was through this country once, and remembers well how dark and dreary seemed the hills and forests through which the James Boys chased Oliver Davis.

As the pursuers were ascending the hill they were joined by Frank and Jesse, who still went under their names of Jackson and Milstead.

"Be careful!" cried Jesse.

"Are they near?" asked Saunders.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"On the hill."

A sharp report cut the air at this moment, and a leaden ball came humming through the air. It passed within a few inches of the detective's head.

"Look out!" yelled a fellow named Raddle.

"Too late, Raddle, we're not in danger o' a bullet wat's passed," cried Swanson.

"Let's charge up thar an' chaw 'em up!" shouted Buck Bragg.

"Wall, not much!" said Bright, who was more cautious than some of his companions.

"Why?"

"Because they ain't goin' ter be ez eazy chawed up now ez yer think. We'd better go a leetle slow. I'm a thinkin'."

"There is no need to uselessly expose your lives," said Ike Saunders. "I think the best thing to do would be to deploy like skirmishers, and creep up through the thicket; we can outflank them and then we'll have them at our mercy."

"That's it, boys," cried Swanson. "Git 'em at our mercy."

"Don't kill the young fellow. The reward says alive."

"Gosh, he'll be killin' us, though!" growled Wright.

"Wound him! Shoot his gun out o' his hand!" cried Swanson. "Guess they kin hang a wounded man ez well ez not."

There was a shout, and they began to march up the hill.

Crack!

Sharp and keen rang out the report from the bushes above.

Buck Bragg gave utterance to a yell of rage and pain, and clapped his hand upon his shoulder, which had been lacerated by a bullet.

A slight puff of white smoke could be seen rolling up from the tops of the bushes, but not a sign of a human being was to be seen.

"Up the hill!" cried Jesse James, taking the lead.

Another shot rang out, and a bullet cut a hole through his hat.

But this did not deter the irrepressible bandit. With a wild shout, which so oft had cheered men on in battle, he dashed up the hill amid whizzing bullets.

The crest was gained, but not a soul was to be seen.

A careful search was made everywhere for the fugitives who had so gallantly defended the hill, but not one of them was to be found. The backwoodsmen gazed at each other in wonder.

To them it seemed as if there must be some witchery in it all, and they stood spellbound in amazement.

Then they scanned the crest of the hill, but without avail.

An object was seen flitting along through the woods in a ravine.

"They have gone down to old Whisky Pete's cabin!" cried Swanson.

"To Whisky Pete's? Tear down the house!" was the cry.

Then they rushed pell-mell down the ravine.

A wild, sullen growl suddenly startled them; a huge bulldog leaped from one side of the path, and sprung at Jesse James' throat.

He warded it off with his arm, but the animal struck him with such force as to knock him down.

"It's Whisky Pete's bulldog!" cried several.

CHAPTER IV.

A NIGHT ON THE PRAIRIE.

Jesse James possessed the strength of a giant, and though the dog struck him with such force as to bring him to his knees, he warded him off and drew his knife to kill him.

"Look out for trouble!" cried Swanson.

"Hold on there!" cried a silvery voice, and the pretty form of Minnie Potter could be seen up on the hillside, with a small breech-loading rifle in her hands. "I've got the drop on you," she added, her gun aimed directly at the head of Jesse James. "Don't you hurt that dog, or I will send a bullet through your skull."

"Gosh, she'll do it, Jess!" Swanson whispered.

"Then call off your dog!" yelled Jesse.

"Come, Bull, come!"

The dog ceased battling with Jesse James, and turned about and ran up the hill to Minnie's side.

"Now, you fellows git!" cried Minnie.

"Who are you, young lady?" asked Ike Saunders.

"Minnie Potter."

"What do you do here?"

"I live here, and I want to know what you do here?"

"I am an officer come to arrest a criminal."

"So you are a detective? Nice set of fellows you are to be following a detective! Have you forgotten your oath? Don't you know, fools, that as soon as he captures Ol he'll turn about and take you in?"

She paused, and the effect of her words was wonderful. The men glared at the detective with lowering brows.

With no small degree of concern, he noticed the looks of the people from No Man's Land.

The girl seemed to wield some wonderful influence over them, and he began asking himself how he was to counteract it.

"I assure you that I only want one man, Oliver Davis," he said.

"He assures you he only wants one man!" she cried. "But how soon will it be before he comes back here and wants another; who can say? You boys swore that you would stand by any one who came to No Man's Land to get away from the detectives. Now you are helpin' one to get one of us."

"Get out of the way, girl, we are coming down that pass!" cried Ike.

"You won't."

"Won't I?"

"No. I'll shoot the first man who takes a step!"

"Gosh, she means it, too!" cried Lew Bright.

There was no doubting her meaning, and the detective saw blood in her eye.

"Can't some of you creep around behind her and seize her?" asked Ike.

"I will," said Jesse James.

"No, you won't. Stay where you are," cried Minnie Potter, and her rifle was aimed at Jesse's forehead.

"Let me finish her!" cried Frank James, cocking his revolver.

"Not much!" yelled a dozen voices about him.

Ike Saunders saw in a moment that such a course of proceeding would not begin to do.

The girl was very popular with the people, and it would not do to harm her.

"Don't, Mr. Milstead; that won't do!"

"What is your plan?" asked Frank, letting down the hammer of his pistol.

"Perhaps it would be better to go around some other way."

"It won't do ter hurt Minnie," Swanson whispered to Frank James. "I tell yer it won't do at all, 'cos she's ez popular ez she kin be hyar among the boys, and they'd all die for her."

Frank James scowled at the girl, who stood on the rock above, the small but deadly rifle in her hands, looking like a born heroine.

"Go!" she cried. "Shame on you who call yourselves men. You are traitors, and would turn over one to be hanged for money. Go to your homes, and leave those three villains to me!"

Ike Saunders was a brave, noble man, and those words were cutting to his soul. He felt the keen, cutting remark most severely.

There was a few moments' silence, and then the detective turned to Jesse and said:

"I want a word with you."

"Very well."

Taking him apart, he whispered:

"These men can't be trusted."

"No, I know it."

"It won't do to attack the girl. I think we had better wait and work the matter alone."

"Just as you say," said Jesse.

"Then we will return to Claybank."

This was hardly suggested than it was carried into effect.

The girl stood on the ledge of rock watching them as they retired, holding her rifle in her hands, her thumb on the hammer.

When she had become assured that they were gone, she turned about and hurried down the ravine toward her father's house.

The faithful bulldog followed close at her side.

When the wretched hovel was reached it was found to be deserted.

A perplexed look came over the face of the girl, and she said to herself:

"Where has he gone? I must find him."

Then quickly turning about, she hurried into the wood while the words still rang on her lips.

The fugitive had in the meanwhile been hurrying up the river bank, followed by his faithful friends, Old Hoss and Lee Sing.

The sun had long since passed the meridian, and day had begun to wane, when he halted on the bank of the stream.

"Davy, I can't consent for you and Lee to go farther with me."

"Why, wot yer givin' us?" asked the red-haired giant.

"Gospel truth. You must not go any further."

"Why?"

"This is my quarrel——"

"Yer mean yer own funeral."

"Yes."

"Wall, it may be your funeral, but we air mourners."

"No, Davy, you have both been all the aid to me that you can. Now return to your homes, and let me make my way alone."

"Whar d'yer think o' goin'?"

"I will go to Mexico."

"Mebbe we want ter go ter Mexico, too."

"You must not think of it. I will not permit it. In Mexico I may have a brief respite from my pursuers. Then from there I shall depart to some strange, far-off land, where this awful story will never follow me."

The afternoon was warm, and the three men, who had slept none the night before, found their eyes grow heavy.

The fugitive, despite all his precaution against it, fell into a light slumber.

It could not have been many moments that he was unconscious. He awoke with a start, and looked about him.

His companions, Old Davy and the Chinaman, were both sleeping so profoundly that there seemed little danger of their awaking.

Rising slowly and cautiously from his recumbent position, he stole quietly away.

At the top of the next hillock he paused and looked back upon them.

"Noble fellows, both. Ah, never had man truer friends, but I must leave you. I cannot consent to have you losing your lives in following me. I go now to death."

The sun was just dipping behind the great western prairie, and in the east the shades of night had already begun to appear.

As he hurried along, the stars began to peep out, like silent watchers of the night, upon the scene.

His course was southwest, and as soon as he had passed the outer edge of the woods he came upon the broad prairie.

There was a path, or narrow road, leading in the direction he wished to go.

Steadily he bounded along the dark path.

Silently the shadows of night gathered over the surface of the broad prairie, and the lonesome howl of the coyote alone broke the awful stillness.

The path had been traveled by cattle and wild horses until it was well worn, and the dust lay quite thick.

There had been a long drought in No Man's Land; the grass looked withered and wilted.

"I wonder how all this is to end?" he asked himself, as he trudged slowly along.

The dust rose in little clouds at almost every step, but as the pitying dews of heaven kissed the wilted grass, the dust grew heavier as night advanced.

Taking a star for his guide, the fugitive traveled on.

"Poor Minnie, noble girl!" he unconsciously broke out aloud. "If I had it in my power, how willingly I would rescue you from your present position, and give you that position in society which you deserve."

The night was warm. Bull bats roared over the prairie, and from a distant hill came the carols of a lonesome whip-poor-will.

Slowly the young man wended his way, for his limbs were as heavy as his heart. He now remembered that he had no food.

"What am I to do?" he asked himself. "I have started to traverse thousands of miles of uninhabited wilderness without a bite of food, and nothing but this rifle to obtain it."

He was a good shot and a fair hunter, but game was somewhat

scarce in this part of the world, and one might travel for days without coming upon a single antelope, deer or prairie hen.

He was journeying slowly along, head bowed, and lost in sad reflections, yearning for days to return that never could, longing for the innocence of childhood before he knew what it was to be a criminal, when he was suddenly startled at hearing a footstep in the path behind him.

Quick as a flash he wheeled about, cocking his gun.

"Don't, Ol."

"Minnie!"

"Yes."

"Is it you?"

"Of course."

"Where are you going?"

"Following you."

"Following me?"

He was amazed.

"Don't it look like it?"

"What do you mean, girl, by following me? Don't you know that it is certain death?"

"No."

"It is."

"Then I'll take a dose of certain death!"

There was a charming boldness and infatuating daring about this brave young girl, which made her doubly attractive.

"You must go back, child."

"I won't!"

"Why do you stick to a criminal like me?"

"Because you need somebody to look after you, Ol."

In vain he tried to persuade her to return; she vowed that she was going to stand by him through thick and thin, and he was at last compelled to accept her as a companion.

The night was long and very tedious to the travelers.

When they had gone about ten miles on the vast prairie, he proposed that they halt and she sleep until noon.

"No, you sleep."

"I am strong——"

"But you have more need of it," she said.

"I have not more need of it, nor so much as you."

"But if I should sleep, you would go away and leave me."

"I give you my word I will not."

"I believe you, Ol," and she slept.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIGHT IN THE VALLEY.

Rosy day peeped in through the curtains of night on the sleeping girl, and dispelled all darkness.

She awoke with a start, and said:

"Ol, Ol, where are you?"

"Here at your side."

"You didn't run away?"

"No."

"You wouldn't?"

"I would not."

"Oh, Ol, I had such a pretty dream! I can't tell it now. I can't describe it, for I don't know how; but it was about people singing, and such lovely music. I thought you took me to the States."

"Heavens, how I wish I could!"

"But you can't?"

"No."

"They would hang you?"

"They certainly would."

"And is it so lovely in the States?"

"It is lovely."

"Do people sing and make music on great instruments?"

"They do."

"I never heard anybody sing but pa, and his voice is like the croak of a bullfrog. I never heard any music except when pa plays on his old fiddle, but everybody says that ain't much."

"Did you never hear any other music?"

"It just seems like a dream to me that I once heard awful fine music, and some men all in nice clothes, with something bright and shiny like gold on their heads. I don't know where it was nor when, or whether it was ever at all, or not."

"I think it was probably a military band."

"What's that?"

"A band of army musicians, men who play instruments in the army for soldiers."

"I don't much expect I ever heard it. I just dreamed it."

"More likely that you heard it when a very young child. Tell me where were you born?"

"I don't know. Don't know that I was ever born at all."

"You have no recollection of any other home."

"Oh, first I can remember pa was scrambling around with me a kid somewhere, I don't know. He won't talk with me about it at all."

"It is now getting late in the morning, Minnie, and we must not linger here longer. Let us be moving off toward the southwest, unless you will promise to go back."

"I won't!"

"But we have no food."

"Can you starve?"

"I may have to starve."

"Then I will, too."

She was resolute, firm and determined.

"Come on, then, and let us hope that we will soon come upon some game."

They started down the long, unending path which seemed to stretch away to the southwest forever.

"Where does this road lead?" she asked.

"To Mexico."

"You are going there?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll go too."

"What will you do when you get there, Minnie?"

"What will you do?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Neither do I."

"You are a strange girl."

"Yonder is something strange."

"Where?"

"On our right."

"Five horsemen," he cried, as his eyes fell on them.

There was an uneasy look on the face of the fugitive. He observed that the horsemen were coming directly toward them.

As they drew nearer, he thought he recognized Swanson among them.

"Minnie," said Oliver, turning suddenly upon the girl, "those are my enemies."

"The detectives?"

"Yes."

"They are mine, too."

"They are coming to take me, dead or alive. Minnie, and it will never be alive. There is the road back to Claybank City. Take it, and follow it until you reach home, and then forget me."

"I won't do it."

The answer was as firm as it was abrupt.

"Minnie, you not only endanger your own life, but mine. Alone I might escape those men, encumbered with you, it will be impossible."

This argument went home. The sensible girl realized that she must be a hindrance rather than an advantage.

Turning her pretty face to his, she answered:

"Ol, I will go with you to the valley. We can cut across and get there before they do, and then I'll leave you. When you are in the valley, you can lick them."

"Very well. Lead on."

They started at a brisk walk. Minnie taking the lead. Brought up to hardships and fatigue, she seemed untiring.

Her steps never flagged, and Oliver Davis was soon to learn that she could travel quite as well as he. Glancing over his shoulder, he observed that their pursuers were persistently following them. They had discovered them, and were quickening their speed to a gallop.

The girl also noted their actions, and increased her speed to a run.

He followed her, but she seemed to possess stronger powers of endurance than he.

Oliver was panting and breathing hard as he passed on up the hill after the girl.

Passing over a ridge, they entered a narrow valley.

It was an excellent place of defense, as well as to hide. The valley was narrow and covered with great stones and broken boulders, which had at some time doubtless fallen from the bluffs above, and was covered with tall, rank grass.

"Here you can hide and fight," said the girl.

"Now, Minnie, go," he said. "Leave me to my fate, and with this good gun I believe I can make it warm for them."

"I have a rifle too," said the girl, "and I know how to use it."

"But you must not. It is not in your nature to shed blood."

"No, I'd rather not. I never have, and I expect when one does, the stain of it will be on their hands forever. I guess no water that ever ran or fell from the clouds will wash it off, but when it comes to having to do it, I am not behindhand in the work. I'll do it."

She looked like a queen of battle as she spoke.

"Remember your promise to me."

"Yes, I do."

"Then you will go."

"Yes, but I would like to help you."

He bade her go, and she reluctantly turned about and took her departure. Slowly up the steep bluff she climbed from crag to crag.

"Come on, come on, they are in this valley somewhar," yelled a voice at the head of the valley, which Oliver was not slow in recognizing as Sam Swanson's.

The five horsemen were entering it, and the ground was so rough and treacherous that they had to travel with the greatest caution.

The ground was not only covered with vast stones, but full of pitfalls concealed by a dense growth of grass and weeds, which covered the whole face of the ground.

Down went Swanson's horse into one of these pitfalls.

It was well for him that it fell, for at this moment there came a little puff of smoke from up the steep embankment, and a bullet aimed by an eye that was as true as any marksman's went through his hat.

Had not his horse fallen into the hole, the bullet would have pierced his brain instead of his hat.

"There he is up there!" yelled Frank James.

"Up after him!" cried the detective.

"He isn't up there," put in Jesse James.

"Why?"

"It's the girl."

"Impossible!"

"No, it is not. I saw her up there. See, there she goes from rock to rock."

"I see her—I see her!" cried Frank, his cold, steel-gray eyes flashing like a demon's. There was a glitter in them that was terrible, a glitter always seen before he sent a death shot.

Frank snatched a revolver from his belt and fired at the girl. Light and nimble as a mountain roe, she skipped from stone to stone and cliff to cliff.

"Is she a witch, that I can't hit her?" cried the outlaw.

Again Frank James leveled his pistol.

Bang!

She continued bounding up the hill.

Frank gave vent to an expression more forcible than elegant, and turning to a man at his side, said:

"John, len' me your gun?"

"Here."

He was now quite sure he could bring down the girl, and leveled his piece at her as ruthlessly and carelessly as he might take aim at a buck.

But at this moment there came a loud report from down the valley, and a bullet struck the back of the rifle close to Frank James' face, and cut it off.

Oliver fired the shot to kill, but by accident he disarmed Frank without hurting him.

"Come on and fight me, and do not shoot at a girl!" screamed the enraged fugitive.

His pursuers now saw the daring fugitive, for whom there was the enormous reward of one hundred thousand dollars, standing on the top of a large, flat stone.

"There he is—there he is!" cried Jesse.

"Yes, here I am. If you want a fight, come on!"

This was a challenge that one of the James Boys never slighted.

"Down on him!" roared Jesse, in a voice which sounded not unlike the bellow of a mad bull.

It was answered with a wild cry, and they urged their horses on through the rough ground as rapidly as they could, but it was so broken and so uneven that they stumbled and fell at almost every step.

The rifle cracked again from down the valley, just as Jesse's horse stumbled, and the bullet grazed the bandit's cheek.

"He has an advantage, being on foot," said Jesse James. "Dis-mount, and we will after him!"

In a moment every man leaped to the ground and started toward the fugitive, who, crouching behind some grass-covered rocks, poured in shot after shot at them.

The attacking party had but two guns, and one of these was disabled by the first shot.

"He has the advantage in fire-arms," said Jesse. "We must flank him and get nearer. Our pistols are not as long range weapons as his rifle."

This was agreed to, and the five men deploying as skirmishers, began to advance.

Sam Swanson, who had the only available gun, was armed with an old fashioned muzzle-loading rifle.

He fired as rapidly as he could load.

But Swanson was a coward, and took good care not to expose his own pate to the bullets of the man whom he was trying to kill. He consequently fired at random.

They all pressed in closer and closer to that pile of crater-shaped stones, pouring in shot after shot as rapidly as they could fire.

Sometimes they paused in the fight, and waited to see if the daring fugitive would yield, but only a light puff of smoke and the heavy report of his rifle answered.

"Frank, he's true grit!"

"Yes, Jess, he is."

"I never saw a pluckier fellow in all my life!"

"I wish we could take him."

"But we can't so easily, Jess, we'll have to kill him."

"I'm afraid so."

"And then we'll lose the reward."

"We must not do that; we must have him alive."

Bang! went a shot from behind the crater-shaped stones, and Jesse James fell forward on his face.

Springing to his side, Frank James raised his brother in his arms, to find a purple stream flowing from his face.

With eyes gleaming with hate, Frank James shook his fist in the air, and cried:

"Now he shall die—he has killed my brother, and his life shall pay the forfeit!"

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTURED.

Many were the close calls which Jesse James had during his career.

Again and again he had been wounded, shot down and left for dead, to revive and astonish the world afterward with his prowess and daring.

While Frank was still vowing his vengeance, Jesse suddenly and most unexpectedly revived, and turning upon him, said:

"I'm not bad hurt."

"Didn't the shot strike you?"

"Yes."

"In the face?"

"No."

"Where?"

"On the belt buckle. I will be all right as soon as I can get a little breath in my body."

"But your face is all covered with blood."

"That is where my forehead struck on a sharp corner of the rocks."

Jesse and Frank had learned a lesson of caution which was of incalculable value to them. They took care not to show their heads above the tall grass and stones, and keeping within a few paces of each other, crept forward.

Jesse wound a handkerchief about his forehead to stop the flow of blood.

Slowly and cautiously, as panthers and tigers creep on their prey, they advanced toward the crater.

Creeping from pitfall to pitfall, from stone to stone, parting the tall grass so carefully as scarce to make a greater ripple than would have been imparted by a passing breeze.

Nearer and nearer to the dread spot they approach.

Like ravenous wolves their eyes glare at it.

With a cocked pistol in each hand, they crawl nearer, still nearer, and with bated breath and hard-set teeth try to see what is behind the rocks.

Not a word is spoken.

They look all about for their companions, but they are not in sight. This does not intimidate the James Boys. They are used to facing dangers alone, and though they have good reason to respect this new foe, they by no means fear him.

Jesse, with both pistols presented toward the rocks, is first to reach them.

Just on the other side is their deadly foe. He listens, but can hear nothing.

From long experience he knew full well that this death-like silence was oftentimes more to be dreaded than the wildest yelling of a foe.

He is comparatively safe there, crouching under the rocks, with his enemy on the other side.

To show his head above would be to get a bullet, but Jesse had determined to make the leap over this natural breastwork as soon as Frank was on the other side to aid him. Frank crept around and gave his brother a wink.

Jesse nodded, then Frank seized a stone and threw it into the little crater-like fort.

With a yell which might have put a Comanche Indian to shame, Jesse sprang over the stones into the little pit from where the fugitive had made such an excellent resistance.

It was empty.

He gazed about for a moment, dazed and confused, hardly able to credit his senses.

Whither had he gone, how disappeared so suddenly? Had he vanished into thin air, or had the earth opened and swallowed him up? were the questions that he could not answer.

"Jesse, Jesse!"

It was Frank calling.

"I am here," he answered.

"Have you got him?"

"No."

"What, did you let him get away?"

"He got away, but I had nothing whatever to do with it," Jesse answered, sitting down on a hard, round stone and pressing his hand over his puzzled brain.

"How did he escape?" Frank asked, climbing over to where his brother sat.

"Ask me something easy."

"Jess, we might get on his trail."

"He didn't leave any among the rocks."

"He climbed out on the west side; see there, where the tall grass has been bent and parted. Aha, see there ahead of us. The grass wiggles. He is now escaping!" cried Frank.

Bang!

Bang!

Both fired, and there came a yell from the grass.

"Hold on thar, you fellers, don't be er blazin' away at me!"

"Sam Swanson, is it you?"

"Yes."

"What are you trying to do?"

"Sarcumwent him."

"You came very nearly getting a bullet in your skin."

"Gosh, I did! Now, I've hed jist ez many clus clips ez I want," cried Swanson. "Where is he?"

"Gone."

"What?"

"Yes, gone."

"Whar?"

"We don't know."

"How?"

"There you've got me again," answered Jesse.

Everybody grew bolder on receiving information that the fugitive was gone, and heads popped up here and there until all five of the men were visible above the grass.

"Has he really got away?" asked Ike Saunders.

"It seems so."

"Then we've got our work to do over. He has left the valley. Back to the horses."

They were hurrying back to their horses, when a loud voice from the bluff was heard to shout:

"Chaw me up fur buffler meat, Pigtail, ef thar hain't them pesky fellers now! Gin it to 'em!"

Bang! bang!

A pair of bullets came whizzing at the James Boys and the detective.

"Who is it, Jess?" cried Frank.

"That fellow called Old Hoss and the Chinaman."

Lee Sing had a double-barreled gun, and Davy had a Winchester, so they were pretty well armed.

"Git to your horses as soon as you can!" commanded Ike.

"Shoot 'em down, Pigtail!"

And again the Chinaman and old hunter, from the side of the bluff, fired but missed. Being considerably above the valley, they very naturally overshot them.

The horses were gained, the detective and his four men determined to get out of the valley, where they could fight on better ground.

In a few moments they had gained the top of the hill, and the detective cried:

"Where is the man with the rifle?"

"Swanson, here, Swanson?"

"Wot yer want?"

"Come to the front."

"Yes, sir."

Swanson hurried forward, and said he was ready.

"Shoot that big, red-headed fellow," yelled Jesse.

"That air chap's Old Hoss, an' he's a holy terror!"

"So much the more reason you should kill him. Let him have it!"

"Ef I miss he'll turn my toes up ter the daisies."

"Give me the gun," cried Jesse James.

"Here it is."

"Now I'll turn his toes up to the daisies!"

At this moment a stone a few rods above them suddenly broke its hold, and came rolling and thundering down upon them.

"Look, Jess, look!" screamed Frank.

For a single instant every man seemed paralyzed.

It was but for an instant, however. Then the detective gave utterance to a cry of alarm, and being a man of judgment and coolness, he called:

"This way for your lives!"

There was a scrambling and leaping of horses. Jesse James dropped the rifle to seize the rein more firmly, and his horse barely got out of the way of the great, grinding monster, as it came thundering down in its course, crushing the rifle to atoms.

"What loosened that stone?" asked the detective, as the group of horsemen reined in their trembling steeds and turned their eyes to the frowning cliffs above.

"Who knows?" asked Jesse.

Frank James, who had a broad streak of superstition in his nature, trembled; while Swanson shook so he could scarce remain in his saddle.

"I think we had better get on the bluff above," said Jesse James. "Let us stop at nothing until we get at the top."

"That is good advice, and will be taken," said the detective.

Then they hurriedly ascended to the top of the cliff, where a prairie for three miles stretched away to the east.

"Jesse," whispered Frank, "do you know that I believe Old Nick is in this?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jesse.

"Oh, you needn't laugh!"

"Nonsense!"

"Call it nonsense if you will, but if Old Nick's cloven foot didn't kick that boulder down the hill, then I am a very much mistaken man."

"Frank, you are getting as superstitious as an old woman!"

"I tell you I am not."

"Then don't go to talking of supernatural things and events transpiring. Don't let this get out on you, Frank, the boys would laugh you out of the organization."

"I don't like this country, Jess. Let's go back into Missouri. Let's go and do business at our old stamping ground."

"Frank."

"What?"

"Have you forgotten?"

"What have I forgotten?"

"That there is fifty thousand dollars in this."

"I have not," answered Frank: "but when are we to win it?"

"When we capture him."

"That seems as if it would never be done."

"It takes time."

"It's hard to do."

"The more difficult any object is to obtain, the greater the value."

They were riding down the ridge, when suddenly a man started up from before them, fired a shot, and started to run.

"It's he—it's he!"

A single glance revealed the fact that it was indeed young Oliver Davis.

With a yell the entire cavalcade clapped spurs and started in hot pursuit.

Oliver saw that there was a chance for escape, and ran with all his might.

Old Hoss and the Chinaman, from the side of the bluff, saw his danger, and ran to aid him: but at an unlucky moment he dashed his foot against a stone and fell, striking his head against another with such force that he was unconscious.

His friends saw his condition.

Davy and the Chinaman were coming from the bluff, and Minnie, who had not reached the wood, had turned about to see her friend's danger.

She fired, but the distance was too great for her rifle to carry that far, and with a scream she ran toward the captors.

The detective, Ike Saunders, was first to reach the side of the fallen man, and stooping over him, he seized him with one hand, and with the strength of a giant raised him to the pommel of his saddle.

"Away, boys, away!" he cried, and with the captive before him, he thundered over the prairie.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHEYENNE OUTBREAK.

"Stop, wretches, stop!"

"Hold on thar, by hokey!"

"Stop dle Mellikan man, or Lee Sing cussee head white."

"Let him go. Let him go."

From either side of the captors came these shouts.

Minnie was nearest to them, and with the speed of a fawn flew over the ground.

But the Chinaman and Davy were most to be dreaded by them. They were both armed with rifles that would kill, and should they be overtaken or come within gun range they would have trouble.

"Away, boys, ride for your lives!" cried the detective.

Swanson lashed his horse, so did the man called John, and soon they were beyond range of the guns and leaving the footmen far behind.

"Jesse, it's ours!"

"The fifty thousand, you mean?"

"Yes."

"It is if we can get him there."

"We can."

"Don't be too sure."

"Oh, those fellows won't bother us again."

"I am not so much afraid of them as the prisoner."

"We'll iron him."

"I know that, but irons don't always hold a man, and, besides, Frank, you must remember that Ol Davis is no ordinary prisoner."

"And you must remember, Jesse, that those irons are no ordinary irons."

"I grant it."

"Don't despair."

"Who is despairing?"

"But there is one more danger to look after, Jesse."

"What?"

"He may suspect who we are."

"The detective?"

"Yes."

"We'll kill him."

"Then we'd lose the reward."

"But we would save ourselves."

"We would, but we want the reward, too."

After a few moments' silence Jesse turned to Frank and said:

"Do you know that fellow called Bender?"

"Yes."

"Is he John Bender?"

"Yes."

"Of Kansas?"

"Yes."

"He is the son of old Bender of the famous Bender family?"

"Yes."

After a few moments Jesse again said:

"It was reported that all were hanged."

"John and Kate got away."

"And he came to No Man's Land?"

"Yes."

"And she, Kate?"

"He don't know what became of his sister."

"Well, that John Bender is too mean for a thief, and we had better watch him!"

After several moments' silence Frank drew nearer to his brother and in a whisper said:

"Jesse, an idea has struck me."

"A good one?"

"Yes."

"Let us have it. Never keep a good idea working long. Now, Frank, what is it?"

"It is this: We are to give those two fellows five thousand each to help us?"

"Yes."

"Well, if both should be killed before we get there neither could claim the reward."

"It's good, Frank. We'll do it."

The detective determined to go eastward to the Missouri Pacific railroad, and board the train with his prisoner.

He had a large scope of country to travel over, and a good part of the journey was through the Cheyenne country.

Poor Oliver gave up in despair. He had made a manly fight against his enemies, but had fallen at last, and was now doomed to be dragged back to the States.

"I will be hanged," he thought. "Even now I imagine I can see the howling mob dancing and yelling all about me like so many fiends, while I swing, struggling in the throes of death dangling at a rope." He felt that he had not a friend in the States save his poor old mother, on whom the blow would fall most heavily.

"Oh, better die, better die here in the forest than there," he mentally exclaimed.

But he was a prisoner, and more utterly helpless than a baby. He was at the mercy of his captors, who were determined.

Frank and Jesse James rode side by side somewhat behind the others. It was a fashion of the James Boys never to allow one to ride behind them in a march.

In all retreats they took the rear.

Jesse was mounted on that elegant coal black steed, Siroc. A nobler, prouder and better animal never trod the earth.

He seemed to disdain the very earth on which he trod.

Siroc's speed was never equaled, and his powers of endurance untold. The horse seemed to have a love for his master that would endure all things.

Jesse sometimes rode him hard, and frequently Siroc was forced to make long runs on an empty stomach, but the intelligent animal did so with cheerfulness.

He never seemed more happy than when bearing his master to safety.

Frank James rode his famous horse, whose name will go down in history, called Jim Malone. Jim Malone was next to Siroc in speed, courage, forbearance and endurance.

The outlaws had had all the world to choose their steeds from, and had made these selections with well-trained judgment in horse flesh.

All day long the little cavalcade with its prisoner slowly traveled southward. When night overtook them they were at a small stream called Coney's Creek. The creek was fringed with a considerable wood.

Bushes and trees grew up and down its banks in thick profusion, and offered an excellent place for camping. Jesse had shot a jack rabbit that day, which was their only food.

A camp fire was built, and the rabbit was roasted before it, the prisoner being given as large a proportion as any of the others.

He had no appetite, and sat mute and melancholy while his companions ate their food with great relish.

The certainty that one is going to be hanged is apt to dull the appetite, and poor Oliver felt that he was being led directly to execution.

He had offended a wealthy and powerful family, and his blood was demanded of them. A hundred thousand dollars was offered for his capture alone, and twice that sum would be given for his conviction and execution.

Money is power, and the poor man has little show against the great and rich. He is trampled beneath their feet, as the elephant and ox trample on the insect.

Suddenly from down the stream there came a yell, not of one voice, but of a dozen.

Every man started up, and even the prisoner evinced some sign of interest in the cry.

"What's that?" said Jesse James to his brother Frank.

"Indians."

"Indians? Aren't the Indians peaceable?" asked Ike Saunders, who began to grow uneasy.

"We are among the Cheyennes now," put in Swanson.

"Well, how are they?"

"They are growling, and shouldn't wonder there was a outbreak afore long," said Swanson.

Jesse James, who had had some adventures with the redmen, suggested that they had better put out a guard that night.

"Yer, right, Jess. Them air jist my noshuns, too," cried Swanson.

Jesse frowned, and taking Swanson out to one side, said:

"Sam, I have told you ever so often not to call me Jess."

"Oh, yes; but yer see I furgot all erbout it, Jess."

"A few more such breaks may arouse the suspicions of the detective sooner or later, and then we will have trouble."

"I won't do it any more, Jess."

"Well, now, see that you don't. If you do, I will put a bullet right between your eyes—see?"

"Golly gracions, Jess, I didn't hev any noshun o' 'fendin' you."

Sam Swanson saw that he meant business, and was careful not to call the bandit by his real name any more. But what he had already said was working mischief. The bandit king had scarce returned to the camp fire before Ike Saunders motioned him aside and said:

"That one-eyed man from No Man's Land seems to know you."

"He thought he did, but he don't," said Jesse James.

"He does know him," cried the prisoner, who unnoticed sat at the root of a tree, his hands and wrists confined by handcuffs.

"Silence, or I'll kill you!" hissed Jesse James, drawing a revolver.

"Shoot, Jesse James, and I will thank you," cried the prisoner, with a laugh.

"He calls you Jesse James," said the detective.

"He is a liar!" growled Jesse. "Come, we've got enough to do now to guard ourselves against the Cheyennes. They may attack us before morning. Pay no attention to what he says—he has all to gain and nothing to lose."

The detective made no response, and in a few moments all were getting ready to pass the night.

Swanson went down the stream to ascertain the cause of the yelling there, and returning said it was only a band of Cheyennes who had been on a hunt and were returning home.

"Are they going from us?" asked Jesse.

"Yes."

"Then we are safe. They will not come on our trail."

By ten o'clock all were buried in slumber save the guard who was left on duty.

Even the prisoner slept. Overcome by anxious care and toil, long privation and want of sleep, wearied nature sought repose, and he was unconscious.

But his was not a peaceful sleep. Even in dreams he was haunted with the dread future. He dreamed he was being led to the gallows and all about him he could hear the wild mob hooting and cheering.

The fiendish faces of the James Boys could be seen among the others, and their jeers and cries made him furious.

At last a bright form darted forward and, falling on her knees before him, cried:

"Oh, you shall not hang him!" she cried. "You shall not—you shall not!"

A single glance, and he recognized in her Minnie Potter.

"Out of the way, girl, out of the way!" roared Jesse James, who wore the black robe of the executioner.

"Never, never!"

"Then die!"

He saw him pull a pistol from his belt, and tried to spring at him, but was powerless to do so. He heard the flash and report of the weapon, and then the air seemed to resound with the cries of a hundred fiends. He started as the girl fell, and awoke to find it all a horrible dream.

But even yet those horrible yells and the crack of guns ring on the air.

"What is it?"

"Injuns! Injuns! There is an outbreak o' the Cheyennes!" roared John Bender.

At this moment Swanson running by the prisoner, cried:

"Tree, tree, ur yer a dead nigger."

CHAPTER VIII.

A THREE HOURS' CHASE.

No wonder that just awakening from a terrible dream to find himself in the midst of desperate combat, Oliver was bewildered.

At first he found it impossible to gather his scattered faculties. He ran hither and thither, this way and that, while all about him was a continuous din and uproar.

He was handcuffed so that he could not run rapidly, for lack of use of his hands in parting the bushes or catching at the trees.

"There goes the prisoner!" cried Jesse James.

"Stop him!"

"Halt!"

Bang!

Whiz—zip! came a bullet most uncomfortably near to the fugitive's ear.

But he heeded it not. He was now flying wildly, madly, he knew not whither, until he brought up head first against a tree with such force that he fell sprawling upon the ground, and for several moments was unconscious.

But even when only in a semi-conscious state the idea of self-preservation was uppermost in his mind, and he crawled away into the bushes, he knew not whither.

When he fully recovered he found himself lying on the ground behind an old log, and could hear no sounds of conflict.

One party or the other had triumphed.

Had the Indians massacred the white men, or had the white men triumphed?

In either case his own safety was no greater. Of course, the redmen would kill and scalp him, while the white men would take him to Lima, Ohio, and hang him.

Between the two he thought he would choose death at the hands of the Indians.

"Oh, I am so tired of this awful life—safety and peace, will it ever come to me?" he mentally groaned.

Whist! he hears a noise.

It is footsteps.

Someone—no, there are two of them, for now he can distinctly hear whispering, are coming toward him.

The fugitive crouched aside to be as much as possible out of their way should they come down his path, and listened.

"Whist!"

"Do you hear him, Frank?"

"I don't know. I thought I heard a slight rustling of the bushes."

"Don't think you did."

"Jesse, what do you suppose became of him?"

"I don't know. He was sleeping as peacefully and quietly as he could when the fight began, and the first thing I knew he was running just as if he was running for life."

"Do you think this is a general Indian uprising?"

"No."

"What does it mean, then?"

"Only a few Indians trying to steal our ponies, that's all."

"Well, they got enough of it."

"You are right, they did."

"I guess it was only a drunken row of Indians and half-breeds, after all. But we must not let him escape."

"No, Frank, after all we have gone through to capture him, we can't afford to give him up. There is fifty thousand in it for us."

"Yes, but Jesse, how are we going to do up those other fellows?"

"Swanson and John Bender?"

"Yes."

"I know how we will do it."

"We don't dare kill them while the detective is around, so we

won't. I know what Swanson is wanted for in Missouri and John Bender in Kansas. We'll get them in the States and arrest both, for a reward is offered for them."

"Good idea."

"What villainy," thought Oliver Davis, as he lay crouched in the bushes.

Jesse and Frank had come to a halt within a few rods of him, and were talking in a low tone of voice, but plenty loud enough for him to hear every word that was said.

After several moments the James Boys went groping their way through the bushes.

They passed so near the trembling, crouching fugitive that he could have easily reached out his hand and touched them.

He felt them groping about above him, and at one time Jesse's hand passed not over an inch above his head.

"Look carefully, Frank, for we are liable to run on him at any moment."

Oliver now had all his faculties about him and knew that his hope of escape lay in immediate action.

No sooner had the James Boys gone around the clump of bushes than he arose from his recumbent position and crawled away in the direction they had come.

He rose to his feet as soon as he was a few yards off and started to run as fast as he could.

"There he goes, Jess!" cried Frank.

"Where?"

"Behind us."

"Halt! Halt!"

"Halt, or we fire!"

But the fugitive continued to run.

Bang!

Bang!

Whiz! went a bullet through the air, cutting too close to the cheek of the fugitive to be comfortable.

Oliver ran wildly, blindly forward until a fierce yell greeted him.

It was the yell of Indians. The Cheyennes had been beaten off by the white men, but had not gone far before they were reinforced, and were now returning to renew the conflict. That which had really only begun in a drunken row had now grown serious.

Bullets rained about the fugitive, and he found himself rushing right onto the rifles of the enemy.

"Heaven help me!"

He wheeled about and ran for life in a different direction.

Wild yells seemed to make the air quake.

He ran through the brush at right angles from both foes.

He fell into a ditch washed out by the rains.

In a moment he was on his feet again and flying over the ground at a rate of speed which seemed to defy pursuit.

With yells, both the white and red foes pressed after the fugitive. He has now passed from the forest, and is now on the vast prairie with the foe pressing close in the rear.

But now the Indian pursuer meets white, and then comes the struggle.

There is a rattling crash of shots—a chorus of yells.

"This is my salvation," thought the fugitive.

He paused on the top of a hill and looked back to see the two races of foemen clutching with each other in deadly combat.

Jesse and Frank James were hosts in themselves when they chose to be such, but they were now more bent on capturing the fugitive than fighting an enemy.

"Frank," whispered Jesse, "let's outflank them and follow him up."

"A good idea, Jess."

They ran around the Indians, or rather tried to, but failed. Old He Dog, a chief at the head of a dozen Cheyennes, headed them off and began firing at them.

"Now, the greasers may look out!" cried Jesse.

"We'll paint the ground red with them."

"We will."

"But look, Jess, there come fifty more."

"I suspect we had better be getting out of their reach," was Jesse's final conclusion, and one of those deep, peculiar streams known on the frontier as "draws" being near, they plunged into it.

Oliver Davis was not long in discovering that both his red and his white foes were determined on his capture. He ran over the ridge, and narrowly escaped a volley of bullets and flight of arrows.

"Oh, if my hands were free, and I had a rifle, I would sell my life dearly to those white and red savages!"

He had been running almost three hours, and his body was covered with perspiration. So great had been his exertion that the blood gushed forth from his nostrils and streamed down over his breast.

He discovered that his only pursuers now were the Cheyennes. They were slowly gaining on him.

Not that Oliver was slow of foot. There was not a man in all the West more nimble and fleet, either white or red, nor one who,

under ordinary circumstances could endure more fatigue and hardship than he.

But he had not the use of his hands, and had been worn out by long privation, hunger and hardship before he began this flight.

The Indians were fresh, and each one long accustomed to physical training.

"It's no use!" he groaned. "They will overtake me soon, and then I must succumb. They'll capture me, and if I only thought they would kill me, I would not care. But—but they will burn me at the stake, or do what is worse, hand me over to the white men."

He was growing weak, and stumbled quite frequently as he plunged along over the rough ground.

"Stop, white mans, stop!" cried a tall savage, who led all the others in the chase. "Me killee white mans—whoop wah, me big chief!" and the pursuer brandished his spear in the air.

With a spirit of determination that was simply wonderful, the fugitive determined not to yield as long as he had the strength to run. His foes must run him down, he would not halt and surrender.

"Whoop, big Injun!"

Once more he glanced over his shoulder and espied a tall, powerful Indian coming close after him.

He had a spear in his hand ready to pin him to the earth. Oliver in a moment determined on a plan of action.

Quick as thought he dropped down upon his hands and knees, and the big Indian, being so near that he was unable to stop his headway, went head over heels over him, striking the ground several feet beyond.

"Whoop—wah!" shouted his companions.

Quick as thought the youth was on his feet, and darted off at right angles from the course he had been taking, and leaping into some tall grass disappeared, leaving the baffled Indians in a state of bewilderment.

CHAPTER IX.

MINNIE TO THE RESCUE.

The western part of the Cheyenne reservation is a wild, broken, hilly region, covered in places with vast prairies, and in others with heavy timber. It has many streams whose wooded valleys are morasses, covered with a tall, coarse grass, known in the West as "bottom grass."

This is what Oliver concealed himself in, and it made a very good place of concealment.

He heard the Indians near him talking in their Indian tongue, searching here and there for the fugitive, but without avail.

Then he heard them going away.

Day dawned, and from his hiding place he saw the Indians on the hill.

Suddenly they turned about and ran away in opposite directions. He was wondering what had caused their sudden flight and fright, when from across the hill he saw a small party of United States cavalry approaching.

These were his deliverers, and he was almost ready to shout for very joy, when he remembered that the United States soldiers were no deliverance to him.

He stole back into the tall grass, from which he had partly emerged, and realized that all he could do was to die. He was unarmed in a wilderness, and most of all to be dreaded were people of his own race. He had no means to procure food, and even if he had had he was handcuffed and unable to use them then.

Death by slow starvation, or surrender and death by the rope, seemed his only hope.

During the fore part of the day he crouched in a marshy piece of land among the tall grass and weeds.

Once he heard Jesse and Frank James near him. They were talking about the soldiers. Frank feared they would be recognized, but Jesse James thought there was no danger.

"They won't know us, Frank. We have never met this Lieutenant Fitz-Lee."

"No, but some of the soldiers might know us."

"Impossible! Come on, put on a bold front, and never mind the soldiers," said Jesse, in his bold, defiant manner.

"All right."

The lieutenant could be heard talking with Ike Saunders.

"So you say your prisoner got away?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes, he got away during the attack."

"Where did he go, do you think?"

"I believe, sir, that he is somewhere hiding in the tall grass."

"No doubt. We will help you hunt for him."

"That's very alarming news for me," thought Oliver.

He crept from them as far as he could, keeping closely concealed in the grass. Slowly and carefully through the marsh he crept; giving Jesse and Frank a wide berth.

He could hear the soldiers and the detective still talking.

"Did you lose any men?" asked the lieutenant.

"No, one or two got a few scratches, but they amount to nothing. All are ready for duty, and as soon as we capture this desperado, we are ready to go home, if you will guard us across the frontier."

"Which we will."

This was worse still.

To be captured now meant that he would be taken to Lima without fail.

The fugitive came to a small pond.

Skirting the edges of it, he went up a slight hill and discovered a deep, rocky ravine on the other side.

Down this he hastened, leaving soldiers, detectives and outlaws on the opposite side.

"Those James Boys are a great source of dread," said he, hurrying down the ravine. "Their sharp eyes are far more penetrating than the detective's."

He traveled until the afternoon without seeing any sign of pursuit. Then he paused to rest.

He worked so long at his handcuffs trying to get them off that his wrists had become quite sore, and now he had to give it up in despair.

He tried to break them, or file them in two by rubbing them across the sharp edges of stones, but it was all in vain.

Beneath his feet there flowed a small stream of clear, cold water, and he felt a burning thirst. Bending over the stream, with his manacled hands resting on a stone, he stooped down to take a drink.

Scarcely had the cool waters touched his parched lips ere a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, and a voice said in his ear:

"Ugh, me big Injun!"

He started up in astonishment, to find himself in the grasp of a large, burly Indian.

"Ugh, big chief—heap much brave!" grunted the savage.

"Let go of me!"

"No much let you go."

"Very well, perhaps it's as well after all. They will take me and burn me at the stake, and end this miserable existence."

His captor placed his hand to the side of his mouth, and gave utterance to a few short, sharp yelps like the barking of a prairie fox, and in a minute half a dozen tall warriors, armed with rifles, or bows and arrows, came bounding forward.

"See!" cried the captor, pointing to Oliver.

At this the Indian's companions gave vent to grunts of satisfaction.

"Me heap big chief—whoop, me take scalp!"

"Kill me at once and you are welcome to it!" said Oliver, in a tone so pathetic that it seemed to go to the heart even of the savage.

"Who chain hands?" asked the captor, pointing to his handcuffs.

"They did."

"White mans?"

"Yes."

"Bad brothers."

"They are not brothers."

"Why do it?" and the chief of the little band pointed to his fetters.

"They did it because they want to kill me."

"Kill you—they kill white man?"

"Yes, they were taking me to Ohio, far away to the east, where they were going to hang me up to a tree until I was dead."

The Indians gathered about the prisoner, and with no small degree of interest listened to his simple story. They, of course, wanted to know why he was to be hung, and he told them that while in the States he had committed a crime which was punishable with death, and that he would be hanged if he was taken back.

Then two of them seized his handcuffs and tried to break them, causing the captive no small degree of pain.

"Can't no break!" said the chief, who gloried in the romantic name of Split Tongue. "Him no break."

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Oliver.

"We take white mans to our camp."

"Kill me?"

"No talk too much—come."

The Indians, aware of the near proximity of the soldiers, were very cautious in their words, not to speak very loud.

The prisoner was led along among them, and they kept in the low lands, so that the soldiers might not see them.

All were on foot, but the prisoner understood that they had horses somewhere, not a day's journey away.

To his surprise, and also to his gratification, the prisoner was taken in the direction of No Man's Land.

If they continued this course many hours they would sight Claybank City.

When the sun set that night the Indians halted on the banks of one of the tributaries of the Canadian, and Oliver knew that Claybank City was not over ten miles away.

"If Old Hoss, or Davy, and Lee Sing only knew how near I was, they would come to my rescue," he thought.

But they had no knowledge of the proximity of the Indians, and the chances were that he would be taken down into the wilds of New Mexico or Arizona, to be the slave of some Indian chief, or the principal object of a scalp dance.

He was down-hearted on that night. The Indians had supper of broiled venison and prairie squirrels, and he was given some of the unsavory food, which he ate sparingly.

In a few moments the meal was over, and he was placed against a tree and tied with his back to it.

The Indians laid down as is their custom, and went to sleep, not even putting out a guard. But the redskin is a light sleeper.

As an old frontiersman puts it, the Indian always sleeps with one eye open.

A slight rustling of leaves caused three of them to start bolt upright, and lay their hands on their rifles.

And the prisoner was quite sure at the same time that the other three were awake.

But the noise was not repeated.

It might only have been the dropping of a branch from the trees above, or the rustling of leaves from a passing breeze.

The Indians laid down once more.

The prisoner was wide awake, for he fancied he heard strange noises on the breeze.

Several moments elapsed, and then he heard the snoring of the Indians.

"All are asleep," he thought.

What means that? Up the hill he saw an object flitting about. It was just beyond the circle of smoke, and for aught he knew might be only the moving smoke converted by his fancy into some real object.

But he bided his time, and watched to be certain.

Again he saw it.

There could be no mistake this time. It was an animated object flitting about here and there, coming nearer and nearer.

"Whist!"

On the air, gently as the zephyrs of spring, came this whisper to his ears.

The object vanished.

Whither had it gone? Been swallowed up in the earth, or melted into air, or had it disappeared behind a tree?

The latter had been the cause of the disappearance.

He felt that the object, whatever it was, was a friend.

It might be that it would approach him even then, and its very silence and stealthiness would indicate friendship.

He could not see it distinctly enough to know whether it was man or woman, and he was curious to know.

Again the column of smoke ascending from the camp fire rolled aside, and he saw the form once more.

It was a slight, girlish form advancing toward him so cautiously that he could not hear a single tread.

"Whist!"

Faint was the caution, but it reached his ear, and filled him with hope.

Then she disappeared around a large tree.

Now she was coming up directly behind him.

The Indians snored, and his heart beat high with hope. But where is she now? A minute, two, three minutes have elapsed since last he heard the faint tread of those small feet.

The youthful prisoner had almost begun to despair, when a keen knife cut the rope which bound him to the tree, and he was almost free.

Minnie Potter had come to his rescue.

CHAPTER X.

OLD PETE AND MORE MYSTERY.

Slowly and carefully, so as not to disturb the slumbering savages, the young man rose to his feet and crept carefully behind the tree.

From out the darkness a hand came beckoning him on.

He followed. Noiselessly he lifted his feet, and carefully, step by step, he advanced on into the darkness until he was concealed by it from the camp.

Then all was dark, and he had to grope his way, for the fire-light no longer aided him.

A small hand seized his own, and led him carefully along for a long distance through woods and among stones.

"Don't be afraid now," said the voice.

"I am not," he answered.

"They are all right, now!"

"Who?"

"The boys. You can come back to Claybank—they'll fight for you."

"How do you know?"

"I saw 'em."

"When?"

"Yesterday. The soldiers coming did the business. When Swanson and John Bender came back and said they were detectives, after all, with soldiers helping them, it turned every one of our men against 'em."

"Minnie?"

"Well?"

"How can I ever repay you?"

"I don't want pay."

"I owe you my life four or five times over!"

"Oh, don't talk about it, Ol. I haven't done more'n I ought to. But you never see such a change as came over the boys."

"In what way?"

"Oh, they are all for you now—all of 'em except Swanson, and he don't dare open his head."

"Are they sincere? Can they be trusted?"

"You bet your life they can."

"What has caused this sudden revolution?"

"Well, you see, it's this. If there is any one thing the boys are afraid of more than another, it's the soldiers. Then, next to the soldiers they are afraid of the Indians, and they somehow can't help thinking that it was those detective fellows who brought the Indians and soldiers on them. So you can just bet they are wrathful!"

They were now far enough from the camp to believe themselves comparatively safe, but they dared not even yet talk above whispers.

"Minnie?"

"Well, I hear, Ol."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Right back to Claybank."

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"Safe—yes—why not? All the boys are on our side, and Davy and the Chinaman are there."

"Let me propose a plan, Minnie?"

"What is it?"

"It's this: Take me to your father's house, and leave me there while you go and bring Davy and Lee Sing to me."

"What for?"

"I must talk with them before I venture to the town."

"Like as you think I had lied about it."

"No, Minnie, you don't understand me," said Oliver. "I don't mean to infer you did not state the truth, but there is a possibility of your being mistaken or deceived in this matter."

"I don't think I am."

"But it's always best to be sure. Take me to your father's house, and then go after the big red-headed man and the Chinaman."

"I will. 'Tain't far: follow me right down this hill, and we'll soon come to it," said the girl.

They took a turn down into a dark ravine, and followed it for a short distance, when they came on the wretched hovel, half buried among the trees.

She opened the door, and a dog started up with a growl.

"Lay down, Bull."

There was a low whine of recognition, and the animal returned to its place under the table.

The girl groped about for a moment until she found a match and lighted a candle.

The dim, uncertain light from the solitary candle gave a ghastly and more dreary aspect to the interior of the hut than the imagination had conjured up.

"Well, you've got another pair of handcuffs on," said the girl, taking down her father's three-cornered file.

"That is right, Minnie, take them off as soon as you can."

"You bet your life I will!" answered the brave girl, and settling down to work with a will, she quickly cut the handcuffs from his wrists.

"Free once more—thank heaven and you for liberating me!"

"Now, Ol, I am going to the city for those fellows. I'll leave you here. You've lost your gun, but there are two revolvers out there on the cupboard, and you can take 'em."

She was gone.

Left alone, the fugitive sank down upon a seat and buried his face in his hands.

"When and how is all this to end?" he asked himself. "It would be better for me if I were dead. Life here, chased about by everybody, driven by detectives and Indians, is hardly worth having. Peace will never come."

Then he arose and went from the room, carrying the lantern into the kitchen to look for the weapons. He found them, and a pair of excellent revolvers they proved to be.

"Both loaded. Well, now I am quite myself again," he thought, "and I will not be made a captive by either white or redman without giving my would-be captors a hard fight."

At this moment Bull, who had been lying under the table in the front room, to all intents and purposes asleep, raised his head and gave utterance to a low growl.

"What does that mean?" Oliver asked himself.

He shoved the candle further back in the corner, and holding a revolver in his hand, crept into the front room.

Bull was still uttering some low, dull growls.

"It's a stranger."

"Come on, Pete—come on!" thundered a heavy voice, which Oliver was sure he had heard before.

"I'm comin'—hic—John—comin'. Oh, total wreck—total wreck!" growled some one in answer.

"It's old Whisky Pete. Who is with him?" thought Oliver.

"Where is the house?"

"Here it is."

"All right, lead the way, Pete."

"What am I to do?" Oliver thought.

Then by chance he put his hand on the wall.

Holes had been bored in the logs and pegs arranged so one could climb up them as if they had been the rounds of a ladder.

To scale these and reach the attic was but the work of an instant, for the loft was not much higher than a man's head.

There was an opening among the loose boards, which served as a place of ingress and egress to the attic.

Oliver had scarcely stretched himself out on the boards, a revolver in each hand, when the voices were heard at the door.

With a fierce growl, Bull started forward.

"Call your dog off, Pete, call your dog off."

"Back, Bull, back, or you'll be a total wreck," growled Whisky Pete, staggering into the cabin. "Come on in, John, an' don't yer be squeamish o' dogs."

"That dog o' your'n don't like me, Pete."

"He, he, who does?"

"Oh, none o' yer wit."

"Set down, John, set down."

"He calls him John, now I wonder who he is," thought the fugitive.

"Wall, I reckon I will, Pete. Thought yer said no un war at hum."

"No one ain't, I guess. Maybe though she's come back. Yes, thar's a light out in ther kitchen."

"Go and see."

"Set down, John."

John Bender sat down on a three-legged stool, and Whisky Pete staggered across the room and through the door to the kitchen.

"Minnie, Minnie?" he called. "Whar air yer?"

"Don't yer see her?"

"No, and I guess she ain't here."

After several calls, old Whisky Pete returned and sat down by John Bender's side.

He brought the candle in and set it on the table at their side.

"Now, John," said Pete, as if he had been promised some explanation, and wanted it at once.

"Wall?"

"What is it yer got ter say?"

John Bender, who was sober, rose to his feet and went to the door, looked out then in the kitchen and all about the house.

"Wot air yer lookin' fur, John?"

"Air we alone?"

"O' course."

"Wot I'm goin' ter say ain't fur no one but you."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Well, say it."

"Pete, I want that gal."

This was said in a sort of hoarse whisper, and the young man in the attic was startled as much by the voice as the sudden declaration.

"Wot yer mean, John?"

"I want ter marry Minnie."

"Oh, she's a child."

"I know it. Better marry her right now, afore she finds out anything."

"Here is more mystery," thought Oliver Davis. "Will wonders never cease?"

"Yes, I say, Pete, you haven't forgot yer promise?"

Old Pete was silent.

Then John Bender bent over and seized his arm.

"Pete?"

"What?"

"Have ye forgot the promise yer made us on that morning?"

"No."

"Yer told pa and ma that yer would obey 'em in the matter."

"So I did then; but, John, I didn't know how hard it would be."

"You must, Pete."

"The poor gal alone."

"No."

"For a while, she is yet so young. She don't know nothin' erbout it an' never will."

"Say, Pete Potter, I spent a life in crime and hardship, and for what? For money, for a fortune, that I might live in ease and splendor, and now that I've got a chance I am not goin' to be balked. I know Minnie Potter is a gold mine, and I tell yer now, old Whisky Pete, I'm a-goin' ter have that gold mine."

"How would that help yer, John?"

"Help me, igeot!"

"Yes."

"What's hers would be mine, won't it?"

"Yes."

"Go an' claim it, yer old fool."

"Go an' claim it! Yer wouldn't dare do it. Why, in Kansas they're offerin' thousands o' dollars fer yer head, and don't keer whuether it air on yer shoulders ur not."

"They do, eh?"

"Course."

"Can't I take another name?"

"But yer can't git another face, John. That air face will give yer away, I don't keer what happens."

"Well, ez soon ez I git the mon, I'll give this country ther skip. I tell yer what, Pete, Minnie Potter's worth her weight in gold. She's a gold mine, and I'm ergoin' ter have her."

He spoke quite vehemently, elevating his voice all the time, and evidently grew angry at the slight shadow of an objection which old Whisky Pete interposed.

"It's no use to get mad, John."

"No, not a bit!" thundered a voice, and Jesse James, followed by his brother Frank, leaped into the cabin.

"What, you hyar?" cried John.

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"Minnie Potter."

"Jesse James, stand back!"

"Hold on, John!" cried Jesse, as the villain's hand went toward his belt. "Don't you dare lay a finger on a weapon, or it will be the last act of your life!"

For a moment the two men stood glaring at each other. There was a deadly meaning in Jesse James' words, and John Bender knew enough of him to know he would not be trifled with.

"Oh, come, come, boys, wot's ther use o' raisin' a disturbance here? Why, we're all peaceable an' quiet ez we kin be, an' we love one another jist like brothers, don't we now?"

"Yes—ha, ha, ha!" roared Jesse James. "Of course we love each other like brothers."

"But, Jesse James, you've gone back on us, and joined the detectives."

"Hush, fool! If I cap pull the wool over the eyes of one of Pinkerton's men, who'll say I haven't a right to do so?"

"Nobody, in course. An' now——" began Pete, rising.

"Set down, Pete!" cried John Bender, seizing him and hurling him back into a chair.

"Total wreck—total wreck!" groaned Pete, as we went into the chair, upset it, and rolled off on the floor.

"Now, Jesse James, tell me what yer mean?" demanded John Bender.

"I mean what I say, that the girl, Minnie Potter, is mine."

"Your'n?"

"Yes."

"Why, by what right?"

"This!" and the bandit king snatched from his hip a revolver.

John Bender was a man of more intelligence than the world has ever given him credit for having. He was by no means a coward, and yet he was not rash.

"Jesse James," he said, in a calm, unmoved tone of voice. "I have heard much of yer; that yer war daring, brave an' that yer war a bad man. That yer lifted many a purse on ther highway, robbed banks and trains, and played ther mischief ginerally. But the newspapers say ye've got a home, a wife and child, and that yer love 'em. Now, ef that be so, wot d'yer want with this gal?"

"The newspapers may lie," Jesse returned.

"Mebbe they don't."

"Very well, believe as you please. I want to inform you one thing, John Bender, that is, that I know all about Minnie Potter."

"Yer do?"

"Yes."

"Does he, Pete?"

"I dun know—total wreck!"

"I know all about her history from beginning to end. I have been for years hunting her up, for I know there is not a gold mine in the world richer than she. I have found her, and she is a gal I am not going to give up."

"Hold on, Jess, you come hyar with a detective feller ter take Ol Davis away. Now stick ter yer own business."

"No, we've changed base," cried Jesse. "We have served notice."

on the detective that we are going to quit him, and to-morrow we will turn him over to these wolves of No Man's Land to hang or do with just as they please; and we will devote all our attention to Minnie Potter. They'll hang Ike Saunders, and little pity have we for him if they do. Let 'em hang him. I intend to take Minnie with me."

Mystified more than ever by what he had heard, Oliver Davis clutched the revolvers he held in his hand, determined to defend Minnie Potter with his life.

He found an outside window from the attic, and crept slowly, carefully and cautiously down the outside wall.

Scarce had he reached the ground ere he heard the footsteps of Minnie Potter, accompanied by Old Hoss and the Chinaman.

"They must not come here," he thought. "It will never do to have them come here. I must find some means to head them off and keep them from meeting these men."

CHAPTER XI.

JOHN BENDER.

"Wall, gal, yer deserve a medal, so yer de! Whoop, chaw me up ef I war ever so glad in all my born days."

"Whist!"

"Wat's that?"

"Halt!"

The click of a gun-lock was the answer.

"Ber Jove, Pigtail, we air in fur it. Tree, Minnie, or yer a gone goslin!"

"Davy, don't shoot."

"Ol."

"Yes."

"Air it you?"

"It is."

"Well, chaw me up——"

"Not so loud, please, Davy, there's trouble."

"Whar?"

"At the house."

"Wall, now I'm blamed ef I take yer in. I don't savey at all wot yer mean."

"I don't know what I mean, Davy; but I know that some villains at the house are plotting for the capture of this girl."

"Captur' ther gal?"

"Yes."

"Well, let 'em try it!"

"You do not know who they are."

"No, nur I don't keer; but ef they want a leetle fun, jist let 'em try that on! Why, mistur, I'm jist a hankerin' after a little sport. I'm er dyin' fur some one to chaw my ear."

"These men are a combination of all that is cruel, desperate and bold in the world. Every one has a national reputation as a scoundrel in his line."

"Yer know 'em?"

"I do."

"Who air they, anyway?"

"First is John Bender, a wild, desperate murderer of Kansas."

"I've hearn tell on him, an' he's a bad un."

"Next come Frank and Jesse James, the famous Missouri banditti, and men noted for their desperation."

"No use o' sayin' any more, I know all on 'em, an' while I'm hankerin' for a scrimmage, I don't keer for a cyclone. Guess we'd better gin 'em a wide berth."

"Let us go somewhere else," said Oliver. "Minnie, have you no friend who will hide you at her house for a few days?"

"Why not go home?"

"You must not go there now; your house is in the hands of enemies."

"Well, can't we fight them?" asked the girl.

She little comprehended the danger which surrounded her, nor dreamed of the powers of the dread monsters who were ready to seize her and drag her away.

"No, Minnie, you must go somewhere. Let us take you to a place of safety. Fighting must be a last resort."

"I don't see what they can want of me," said the girl.

"That is a mystery we can't explain now. Where will you go?"

They waited for a moment for the girl to recover her self-possession, and then she said:

"I can go and stay with Sally Hibbard, I guess."

"Sally Hibbard, where does she live?"

"Over the hill and across the creek."

"Then let us go over the hill and across the creek, for we have but little time to squander in waiting here."

Sally Hibbard proved to be a good woman of her sort. She was illiterate, ignorant and uncouth in her manner, and then she had as tender a heart as ever beat in woman's breast. She had simply

followed her husband into No Man's Land. He had been on the Missouri frontier, when he became concerned in a cattle deal which caused him to take a sudden departure.

He left his country for his country's good.

Though her husband was a cattle thief, she stayed with him. When they appealed to Sally she was at home in bed. She heard the rap, and being alone with two children, her husband being at the saloon, she was at first a little obstinate about admitting any one.

They knocked several times before she demanded:

"Who is there?"

"You speak, Minnie," said Oliver.

"Oh, yes, I hear yer whisperin' out thar. Now, d'yer clar out, ur I'll take the old double-barreled gun an' gin yer both a dose o' buckshot!"

"It's me, Sally."

"Who?"

"Me."

"Minn Potter?"

"Yes."

"Who air with yer?"

"Some friends."

"Goodness gracious, why didn't yer say so afore?"

The door was opened, and the girl entered the house.

Explanations were made, and Sally's great heart went out toward Minnie.

"Wall, ye kin just stay here as long as we've got a scrap o' bacon or a dust o' meal in ther house," she said, "and if them fellers come around here botherin' yer, fetch take me ef I don't gin 'em both barrels o' old Broken Ribs."

"You are a good, brave woman, Sally, and I won't be afraid with you," said Minnie.

Then Oliver and Davy, with Lee Sing, left the house and went down to Claybank City.

"Yer won't be in any danger thar 'nless it's Swanson, and the boys air all on yer side. He won't dar do nothin'."

"I will go direct to my little house, which is at the head of the gulch," said Oliver.

"D'yer live thar all by yerself?"

"No."

"Who stays with yer?"

"Lee Sing."

"Yesee, me washee, cookee Mellikan man; washee—washee—washee."

"Oh, thar's whar yer stick so cluss ter him, I reckon," cried Old Hoss.

"Lee Sing an' Mellikan man belly good, belly good friend."

"Wall, I guess yer want ter go hum an' git some sleep."

"I do."

"All right. I'll go up ter Claybank, play fer a while, an' then go ter bed."

Oliver Davis reached his humble cabin, which stood almost a mile up the gulch from Claybank. He was accompanied by the Chinaman, who was not only an excellent servant, but a faithful friend.

Every one knows how pleasant it is to get back home once more after a long absence, to rest after sleepless nights.

The Chinaman prepared Oliver's bed, and he was soon asleep. He scarce touched his rough couch ere his senses were locked in slumber, and he knew nothing until he was awakened by the Chinaman, with the intelligence that breakfast was ready.

That frugal repast over, he rose from his chair and determined to go to Claybank and learn what he could.

"I may be risking considerable by braving all these dangers, but I am going to try it," he thought. "Lee Sing, has any one been here?"

"No. Mellikan man all alonee."

"Where are you going to-day?"

"Chinaman cantee tellee. Mellikan man slay whatee Chinaman do, allee samee."

"Remain at the cabin until I come."

Then, armed only with his pistols, Oliver left the house.

He found a path leading through the woods and bushes toward the village, if Claybank could be called a village.

Suddenly he was startled by voices of men in dispute.

There was a ravine near by, and he crept along in it to see the cause.

From behind a great stone he looked forth on the road, and saw four men in a group. He recognized them in a moment. They were Frank and Jesse James, Sam Swanson and John Bender.

The four men were engaged in a quarrel, of which John Bender and Sam Swanson seemed principals.

"Sam Swanson, stand out, yer not in this at all!" cried Bender.

"I ain't, ain't I?"

"No!" and John Bender struck the breech of his rifle in a most determined, vehement manner.

"Wall, by the walkin'-stick wot parted the water fur Moses, say we'll see. Frank, you an' Jess ain't erboin' back on me?"

Jesse and Frank James, who were never known to be true to any one but themselves, merely smiled their faint, cruel smiles, and the former, who nearly always acted as spokesman, said:

"We are out of that, Swanson. You and the detective can take Oliver Davis back to the States and receive your reward for him. We don't want anything to do with him."

"And why?"

"We are on a new lay."

"Oh, are you?"

"Yes, a golden lay."

"And yer perpose ter cast me off arter ye've used me all yer kin? I'm ter be shoved aside?" yelled Swanson, giving his whiskers a pull.

"Yes."

"I won't stand it!"

"Ye'll hev ter!" and John Bender again struck the barrel of his rifle in a most menacing manner.

"I do, do I?"

"Yes."

"Wall, we'll see."

"Hold on, Sam Swanson. Don't yer go ter layin' yer hand on ther butt o' that pistol, or may I never shoot another antelope if I don't let a streak o' daylight an inch wide clean through yer."

Swanson was somewhat awed by the bold, determined manner of the villain.

"And this arter all I've done fer yer, John?"

"Yes, ye hev done lots fer me, Sam Swanson! Why, yer blame thief, ye've stole from everybody—friend or innemy—ye ever had anything ter do with."

"Jess," appealed Swanson.

"Oh, I can't help you, Sam."

"Frank."

"Nor I."

"This is hard."

"It's fair."

"Fair?"

"Yes, you go with Ike Saunders."

"Ike Saunders?"

"Yes, catch Ol again, he's back."

"Fools, don't yer know we'd not dare?"

"Not dare?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The boys."

"Give 'em ten dollars more."

"They'll not be bought off now."

"Why?"

"The soldiers and Indians air ther cause."

"Well, Sam, we have closed a deal."

"With him?"

Nodding at John Bender.

"Yes."

"And left me out?"

"Out?" roared Bender, "ye wur never in!"

"John Bender, yer a——"

"Hold on!" roared John Bender, catching his rifle. "By all I hate an' fear, I'll drop yer dead if yer say it!"

"Come, Sam, be reasonable," said Jesse James. "You see, we have been on the lookout for this girl for two years. We got the key to the secret when we did that Muncie business."

"I was with you there."

"Of course——"

"And he warn't."

"No."

"And yer let him in and leave me out?"

"We can't help it. He was already in."

"Was he, then? So will I be."

"Yer won't, Sam! Thar's no more to divide with."

For a moment Sam Swanson was silent.

Overpowered by a rush of wrathful emotions which were entirely beyond his control, he was speechless.

His hand moved convulsively toward his pistol belt, and his eyes gleamed with all the fury of a demon's.

"You fellows have played a fine game, you think!"

"Go on now!"

"Not until I have told yer what I am going to do."

"Tell us, yer fool!" cried John Bender.

"I'll balk yer yit. I know all o' the Minnie Potter business. Now, yer got ter take me inter this, or I will blow it ter every feller about hyar. They shall know it."

Jesse, Frank and John Bender started convulsively at this, and glared at the fellow who had dared to defy them in this manner with annihilating fury.

"Fool, what do yer mean?" hissed John.

"What I say! I will pile yer little game too quick fur yer, for by the boys know it, and then there'll be a grand divide."

"Yer shan't."

"I won't, eh?"

"No."

"I will!"

"We'll see!"

"Hold on, turn yer handle to that air gun, John Bender, or may I be throwed cold in my tracks ef I don't pull my pistol an' drop yer whar yer stand."

"Threaten me, do yer?"

"Yes. I'll kill all three o' yer, or hev Minnie."

"Fool, do yer want ter die?"

"No."

"Then keep that air fool mouth o' yourn shet, ur ye'll go under sure as fates!"

"I tell yer ter do yer wust, an' I'm on hand every time!"

John Bender gave utterance to a low, sarcastic chuckle, and said:

"You—yer coward, ha, ha, ha! yer a-tremblin' right now!"

"Yer a liar——"

"What?"

John raised his gun, and Sam snatched his pistol.

There was a sharp report, and Sam Swanson fell at John Bender's feet, grasping his revolver in his nerveless hand.

John's bullet had pierced his heart, and he was quite dead.

CHAPTER XII.

JESSE JAMES AND OLD PETE.

"You have killed him!" said Jesse James, bending over the fallen man.

"Wall, that's wot I aimed at."

"He is dead—shot through the heart."

"Now we three hev the secret all ter ourselves," said John.

"No—there is another."

"Who?"

"Old Pete."

"But the girl, where is she? We can do nothing until we have found her."

"Oh, ther gal kin be found when the times comes, lemme tell yer."

"I don't know, she seems to be securely hidden away. But old Pete?"

"Let's get rid o' him?"

John Bender, like Jesse and Frank James, had no hesitation about taking human life.

Coolly turning about, he walked away, saying to himself as he did so:

"One less to divide with."

That very thought was uppermost in the minds of the James Boys as they too turned and walked from the corpse, in a different direction.

"It's all right, Frank," said Jesse.

"Oh, yes, one less to divide with."

"And we may not have him."

"You mean we won't, Frank."

"That's just about the size of it!"

"I agree with you."

"If he dies suddenly he need not be surprised."

The two bandits were walking along a narrow path which led close to where Oliver Davis lay concealed.

"Where are you going, Jess?"

"I want to find old Whisky Pete."

"Why?" asked Frank.

"He knows where the girl is, and the old rascal shall tell me."

"Aha, I see your plans, you scoundrel!" hissed the concealed man to himself, "and now I will follow and thwart you."

Jesse and Frank James mounted their horses, which they had left tied to trees only a few rods away, and rode at a gallop across the hills. Not long after they left, a third man might have been seen to mount a fiery little mustang and gallop away after them.

Jesse and Frank James came to a halt about a mile and a half northwest of the city of Claybank for consultation.

"Well, Frank, what do you say to do with the detective?"

"Put a bullet through him."

"Hadn't we better turn him over to the tender mercies of those fellows?"

"Ha, ha, ha! I had not thought of that."

"I did. What do you suppose the absconders to No Man's Land would do if they got their clutches on him?"

"They would make him stretch a mighty tough piece of rope."

"That's what I think of it."

"Serve him right, too."

"Serve him right, of course; he has no business coming here."

"No."

Then Jesse turned his eyes toward the little village lying among the yellow and green hills, and said:

"Frank, we'll separate here."

"Why?"

"I want you to go to town, make us known to the boys. John Bender will back you; if he don't, we'll tell on him. Tell them we are the James Boys, and we will be more than friends to them. They will lionize us."

"Where are you going?"

"I will go and find old Whisky Pete. Go on now."

He went down the hill at a sweeping gallop, and Jesse turned Siroc slowly around and rode off in the direction of Old Pete's house.

"If the old fellow is not there," he reasoned with himself, "Frank will find him drunk at Claybank. Then Frank will work him. If he isn't drunk at Claybank, he will be drunk here. One thing is very evident, and that is that he will be found drunk somewhere."

He rode leisurely along until the roof of the old hut was in sight.

It was a miserable old tumble-down affair, and the bandit king's lip curled with contempt as he gazed on the wretched hovel.

It was the middle of the afternoon when he dismounted and made Siroc fast to a tree.

"Now I will see who is in there."

He advanced to the door and gave it a rap.

There was no answer.

Rap! rap! rap!

He struck three more distinct raps on the door.

A low, muffled growl was the response.

"That is the dog."

Again he rapped louder than before.

This time the growl became an ominous bark, and the bandit, growing furious, struck the door once more with his brawny fist, such a blow that made the old shanty tremble.

"Pete, Pete?" he called aloud.

"Umph, hawph—wot yer want?"

"Get up."

"Oh, ow, total wreck—total wreck!"

"If you don't open this door, Pete, I will sink that total wreck of yours pretty quick!"

"Who are ye?"

"Bow, wow, wow, wow!"

Low and sullen came the barking of the dog, and the ominous snapping of his fierce teeth told that he was anxious to tear flesh.

"Pete, if you don't call off that dog and open the door, I'll set your house on fire."

"Bull, go lay down!"

"Open the door."

With a sullen growl the bulldog retired to his place in one corner of the room and lay down, his eyes shut and he apparently asleep.

"Pete, Pete, are you going to open the door?"

Pete, who was trying to gather up his scattered faculties, was standing in the door with his hands clasped over his head.

"Who are ye?" he asked.

"Open the door."

"Who be ye?"

"None of your business."

"Wall, I rather guess it air some o' my business. I guess ef I dun know who ye air. I won't be more anxious to open the door."

Crash! came Jesse's foot against the door with such force as to make the whole house tremble to its centre.

"Hold up, or ye'll hev it down!"

"I intend to."

"Wall, I'll see who yer air."

Pete suddenly jerked open the door, and before him stood Jesse James.

"Oh, it air you, air it? Why didn't yer tell me who ye war, an' I'd a-let yer in long ago?"

The bulldog started up with another ominous growl, and Jesse James, drawing a revolver, said:

"Make him lie down, or I will put an end to him!"

"Down, Bull."

The animal, obedient to the voice of his drunken master, went to his place under the table and lay down.

"Now, wot yer want, Jess?"

"Wanter to see you."

"Wall, wot erbout?"

"Sit down, Pete, and let's talk."

Pete, after making a circuit all about the room, came to a stop in front of Jesse and dropped upon a stool.

"Wot yer want to see a total wreck fur, anyway?"

"There are many reasons why I might want to see you, Pete; and I want you, now, to tell me the truth."

At this very moment a form was gliding swiftly yet noiselessly forward toward the house. Not a single sound escaped his lips. The face was pale as death. That ghastly hue and the red scar on

the left cheek would have made that face known anywhere in the world.

It was our hero, Oliver Davis, who like a shadow had followed Jesse James, determined to see what he was doing. He reached the rear of the cabin, and through a crack in the wall he glanced in.

The bandit king was sitting on a seat talking with old Whisky Pete.

"Now, what are they discussing?" Oliver asked himself. "I will learn."

It was just at this point that Jesse James had admonished old Pete that he wanted the truth from him.

"All right, yer kin hev it," he answered.

"See that it is straight."

"Straight goods, all wool, an' a yard wide, lem me tell yer."

"That's what I want now. I want to ask you, Pete, if you know Reuben Clarkson?"

At sound of the name Oliver Davis gave such a start as to almost betray himself. But he was not heard, even though he pulled some of the outside chinking out; Jesse James was too intent on the answer to pay any attention to him.

Old Whisky Pete gave utterance to some sort of a muffled answer, which even Jesse did not catch.

"What did he say?" Oliver asked himself, placing his ear near to the crack. "I must not lose a single word he says, now I must catch it all."

"What answer do you make?" asked Jesse James. "I didn't hear you."

"I said yes."

"You have known Rube Clarkson?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Back in Ohio."

"He was rich?"

"Yes."

"He had some trouble back there."

"Guess he did!"

"You were accused of stealing horses, were you not?"

"Wall, now, how d'yer know?"

"I know all about it. You did steal Payton Foster's horse."

"How d'yer know?"

"I know. There are three indictments in Ohio against you."

"Wall, how many air in Missouri ag'in Jesse James?"

"We are not discussing the Jesse James case now. That will come up for consideration after we have finished Whisky Pete. I know this much of you. You have three or four indictments against you, and you are in Rube Clarkson's employ."

"I wuz afore—"

"Before what?"

"Afore he died."

"Who?"

"Clarkson."

"So Rube Clarkson is dead?"

"Yes."

"Well, you knew him?"

"Guess I did. He saved my neck from the halter."

"That's all on that point now."

"Hope yer ain't got another p'int ter talk on?" said Pete, somewhat anxiously.

"Yes."

"Wall, let's drop it."

"Well, not now, Pete. You are too voluble for me. Too prolific of information for me to let you go just yet. I am going to ask you now to tell me where she is."

"Who?"

"Minnie."

"I don't know."

"Come, come."

"I don't."

"Look out; you lie to me!"

"I tell yer I don't. She ain't been hyar since ye war hyar with John an' t'other feller, yer brother."

"Pete Potter, I don't believe you."

"Swar it, Jesse, swar it, every word o' it air so sure's ye live, now see 'f tain't!"

"Have you no idea where she is?"

"No."

"If you lie to me, you old rascal, I will cut your tongue out of your mouth and scoop the eyes out of your head."

"I swar up an' down, Jesse, an' by all'ts good'n bad, that I ain't er lyin' ter yer. Swar I am givin' yer nuthin' but good, straight goods."

"Well, where would she be most likely to be?"

"Dun know."

"Has she no friends; no women whom she likes?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Wall, thar's Kitty Thompson, thar's Freddie Taylor an' Sally Hibbards. They all be friends o' hers."

"Which would she be most likely to be with?"

"Ye kin look in all their houses. Mebbe ye'll find her in some; but tell me wot yer goin' ter do with her when yer git her?"

"That's none of your business!"

Jesse now rose to his feet as if to go, and Oliver Davis, turning about, hastened down into the ravine where he had left his mustang.

"Now to keep guard and watch over Minnie until I can send her back to the States. Thank heaven! At last the darkness begins to disappear, and I see through the mystery.

He reached his horse, and unfastening him placed his foot in the stirrup to mount, when a strong pair of hands seized him from behind, and a low, determined voice hissed in his ear:

"You are my prisoner!"

CHAPTER XIII.

OLIVER AND FRANK.

Oliver Davis was dumfounded by the sudden arrest.

"Who are you?" he asked, half wheeling about.

It was no use to ask, for he recognized that voice.

Then began a struggle.

"Hold on, sir, hold on, or I will be compelled to shoot you!"

It was Ike Saunders, the detective, and the detective was as strong as he was brave.

No one but a daring man would have ventured into that part of the world.

Oliver felt his blood run cold as the detective drew his revolver.

Not that he was alarmed as to himself.

"My heaven," thought he, "will I be compelled to commit another murder?"

"Surrender, Oliver Davis!"

The detective spoke in a low, but at the same time a very firm voice.

He was a man not to be trifled with, and capture meant death, and Oliver determined to die rather than be taken.

Quick as thought he wheeled about and struck his arm a quick, sudden blow which wrenched the pistol from his grasp and sent it flying to the ground several rods away.

Then he seized the detective by the throat. Both his hands were at his throat, and his fingers wound about them so closely that they almost shut off his breath.

"Oliver Davis?"

"Yes."

"Do you intend to kill me?"

The detective was sinking.

"Heaven forbid that I should. I am only defending myself, that's all."

The two men were now quietly struggling on the ground. It was a silent, desperate struggle.

Occasionally a boot-heel striking hard on the ground would cause a slight sound, but that was all. They were fighting with desperation.

For a moment both paused, as if by common consent, to recover their strength.

They lay on the ground glaring at each other.

Their faces were flushed, their eyes bulged, and their breath coming rapidly.

"Oliver Davis," said the detective, "haven't you blood enough on your hands already?"

"Heaven knows I would not harm a human being if I could help it."

"You can."

"No, I merely fight in self-defense."

"In self-defense! I assure you I will not harm you. Come with me, and I will protect you from any enemy."

"Protect me, indeed! Ha, ha, ha! Protect me until you get me to Lima, Ohio, and then turn me over to the sheriff to be hung. That is protection!"

"You will be given a trial by a jury."

"I know what a trial by a jury means to me. I am penniless, my enemies are worth millions, and a trial means a bribed judge and jury. No, no, I want no trial by any such juries as will be given me. I prefer to die right here, Mr. Saunders. Naw, you are an officer of the law, and you have tried hard to do your duty, but I assure you of one thing, and that is that I shall defend myself to the very last."

"Even to murder?"

"Even to murder, if it must come!"

"Well, here goes!"

Again the detective, brave as a lion, sprang at Oliver.

But as we have seen on former occasions, Oliver Davis was no

ordinary man. He possessed a strength and agility that was utterly deceiving, and as the detective bounded at him, he struck him a blow on the head which stunned him, gave two more in quick succession, and ere he knew it had him again by the throat and was choking him.

In a few moments Ike Saunders was senseless.

Then he left him. He did not even take the precaution to tie him, for that was not necessary. Besides, to tie him out there in the forest and leave him tied would be but little short of murder, and he left him to recover and mount his horse.

He was for a moment at a loss whether to disarm him or not, but after a few moments decided that it would be almost next to absolute murder to leave him without a revolver to defend himself, so he left all his weapons at his side.

"He will soon recover," he thought, "and then he will gather up his weapons and leave, I hope. If he don't, the boys here will hang him. Very well, I have warned him, and now if he will rush right on to his fate his blood be upon his own head; that is all I can say."

He went direct to Claybank City.

As he came in sight Old Hoss, or Handsome Davy, at the head of a dozen men, started to greet him.

"Thar he is, boys, thar's ther great original an' only Ol Davis. He's white, he air, an' true grit. Ef any man wants er leetle fun let him jist say anything ag'in Ol. Whoop, hurrah! I air jist a stinkin' fur a fight!"

A dozen or more gathered about Oliver Davis, and congratulated him on his return.

Among them he saw Frank James.

Leading Davy aside, he asked:

"Do you know who that fellow is?"

"Yes, he air Frank James."

"What does he do here?"

"Oh, he's erround makin' up wi' ther boys. They're goin' ter hang that air detective feller ef they kin git their hands on him."

The young man started, and said:

"I hope they won't find him."

He remembered the helpless condition in which he had left the detective, the near proximity of Jesse James to him, and trembled.

"But I can't help it. He will not believe me. He will not go away without his victim, and if he must be slain, let it be by other hands than mine."

He was not sure that Frank James could be relied on.

Criminals are never honest, even to one another, and of all thieves in the world, he knew that Frank James was the most treacherous.

"Jesse will be here soon," he thought, "and then they will proceed with the search for poor Minnie. I must prevent it."

He took Handsome Davy aside, and said:

"Dave, I want to tell you something."

"Spit er right out."

"Jesse James has determined to find Minnie Potter and carry her back to the States. Now, we must summon all the friends we can and go to the rescue of her should they attempt it. We must keep a close guard about the girl, in order that she may not be captured."

Davy thought the same, and swore that the carnation might fade from the capillary coverings of his cranium until his head was white as an Alaskan peak before he would permit any such outrage.

All day long the young man and his friend kept a sharp lookout for Jesse and Frank, but they made no attempt to find her that day.

Jesse James and old Whisky Pete came to Claybank, and old Pete was not long in getting just about as drunk as drunk could be.

His comet-like nose was seen flaming through clouds of cigar smoke, as he went circling about the bar-room crying:

"Total wreck—total wreck!"

Oliver was doing some special detective work on his own account. He saw Ike Saunders, who had recovered his consciousness, riding up to Claybank City.

John Bender met him, and they went to a clump of trees beneath the hill to talk over their plans.

Oliver knew that John Bender could not be trusted by the detective. He had shot down one of his own companions in cold blood.

"Poor Saunders, you little dream what a set of villains you have to contend with!" he thought.

After they had talked a while, John Bender left him alone and went away for Frank and Jesse. While he was gone after them, Oliver Davis took a small note-book from his pocket, and with a pencil wrote on a leaf the following:

"Beware of John Bender and the two men who came with you. Watch them, or they will get the best of you."

This he tied on the horn of the detective's saddle.

The horse was hitched among the bushes only a short distance away from where the detective sat.

Having accomplished all this unseen, Oliver crept back to his former post of observation and waited.

He had not long to wait before Frank and Jesse James, with John Bender, came back to the detective.

"It's all right now," said Jesse James, on joining the detective. "Don't have any fears, for you can come right up to the city."

"Have you found the prisoner?"

"No."

"He escaped the Indians. The captured chief says he got away—told the lieutenant so."

"Well, then, he is about here somewhere."

"You have not seen him in the village, Mr. Jackson?"

"No."

"He must be in the bushes. I am going to lay out and watch for him."

"I wonder why he does not tell of his encounter with me?" thought Oliver.

But the detective was a shrewd fellow, and never told more than was necessary to tell. He knew full well that Oliver was in the bushes, and determined to capture him alone if he could.

After a few moments Jesse James said to the detective:

"Won't you come to the town to-day?"

"Not until dark."

"Why not?"

"If he is watching the town and sees me not, at dark he may venture to creep into the place and lay there to meet his friends. If he would see me he would be shy of the spot for days, perhaps."

Then Jesse, Frank and Bender rose to leave.

Jesse said:

"I have it, Saunders. Meet us at the red house on the hill at midnight."

"I will."

"There we will lay our plans."

Then they separated. Frank and Jesse and John Bender came down the path near where Oliver was hiding, and he rose and followed carefully after them.

The woods were thick enough so that he could follow unseen, and when they came to a halt and gathered in a little group in a small glen, the youth was only a few paces behind them.

Down behind a cluster of golden rod he crouched and listened.

"He'll be there," said Jesse, "and then what'll we do?"

"I have it," said John Bender. "I will poison a glass of whisky and give it to him to drink."

"It will do," said Frank.

"I prefer the knife or a bullet to poison," interrupted Jesse.

"Now, Jesse James, let us have our own way in this matter. The quieter a thing like this is done, the better."

"Well, you can do it. I won't be there," cried Jesse.

"All right, Buck Bragg will take your place."

"I must prevent that heinous crime if I can," said Oliver to himself, as he stole away. "Although the detective is my most bitter enemy, I cannot see him poisoned. I—I must prevent it!"

He went to his own cabin and sent Lee Sing after Handsome Davy.

The great, red-headed giant came, and after he had been informed of the scheme on foot, said:

"Wall, pilgrim, I'm certain o' one thing."

"What?"

"Ther gal's safe until mornin'."

"Yes, I believe she is. Now we must try and save the detective."

"Why?"

"It's a villainous scheme they have on foot to assassinate him."

"Wall, ef he don't want to be 'sassinated let 'im keep out o' this country. Nobody wants 'im hyar."

"There is no need to argue with me, Davy, this must not be allowed."

They laid their plans for the night, and at midnight Oliver Davis, armed with a brace of reliable pistols, was at the house designated as the red house.

Crouching down at a place near the door, where some willows formed a cluster, he waited and watched.

John Bender, Buck Bragg, who had been wounded by Minnie Potter, and another villain were in the red house.

All were discussing the events of the day.

Oliver crept up near the window and looked in. Neither Jesse James nor Frank were to be seen, and he began to wonder what had become of them.

At this moment there came cautiously stealing up the path a dark form.

It was a man who was dressed in different costume from the miners and frontier hunters. He was more genteel, and had all the grace and ease of civilization about him; but at the same time was bold and self-reliant.

He came directly to the front door of the house, and knocked three times.

There came three raps from the inside, then a voice said:

"Who goes there?"

"It's I, a friend."

"Oh, it's the detective," said John Bender. "Open and let him in."

Elijah Hargess opened the door and admitted the detective.

"Yer late, Saunders."

"How much?"

"Five minutes."

"So much?"

"Yes."

"Where is Jackson and Milstead?"

"Comin'."

"Soon?"

"Yes; and then we'll get to business. But now, before they get hyar let's hev suthin' ter warm our blood. Hyar's a glass of lickin'."

"I don't care to drink."

"Here, drink with us."

Saunders, being thus persuaded, raised the glass to his lips.

Crash went a noise at the window, and glass and sash were broken. A young man with face as pale as death bolted in through the window and struck the poisoned goblet from the hand of the detective.

"Drink that and you'll die!" he cried.

For a moment consternation held all dumb. The detective saw that the young man was his former prisoner, but before he could say or do a thing he had again disappeared through the shattered window.

Oliver landed on the ground to fall into the arms of Frank James.

Two lions of the plains had met.

CHAPTER XIV.

IKE SAUNDERS IN PERIL.

Frank James was quick as the lightning flash to act. He raised his pistol and deliberately snapped it at Oliver.

Had the weapon fired it would have killed Oliver then and there, but fortunately for some cause Frank's weapon went back on him.

Oliver had not time to draw his own weapon, but being an athletic man, he leaped forward and struck Frank a blow on the head which dropped him senseless to the earth.

"Now is the time to rid the world of a notorious bandit," he said to himself, and quick as thought he whipped out his revolver.

Click!

Click!

The pistol was cocked, and the muzzle was against Frank's breast.

"But no, it would be cowardly," he suddenly thought. "I won't do it. I have blood enough on my hands already, and I can't afford to take any more such risks. I will not."

He thrust his pistol back in his belt, and turned about to go.

Crack!

Sharp and keen rang out the report.

He ran.

Crack!

Crack!

Two more bullets whizzed close to his face.

"What is the matter?" yelled a voice, as the door flew open.

It was John Bender.

"He has killed Frank."

It was Jesse James hurrying to the scene.

"Frank James killed! Jesse, is it true?"

"Yes—look!"

Jesse paused and flashed his dark lantern on the recumbent form of his brother. He raised him in his arms and gazed in his face.

The detective, who had been running about like one in a dream since the glass had been dashed from his hands, now came to the door and gazed out upon the scene.

"He is not dead, he breathes!" cried Jesse.

"He is only stunned, Jesse," said John Bender. "He will soon be all right."

In a few moments Frank James was able to sit up.

All the while Ike Saunders stood dumb and stupefied.

By dim degrees the suspicions of the past few days had been gradually nearing a conclusion.

He had noticed many things on the part of his two companions. Their true characters had gradually become a reality.

"What does all this mean?" he asked, approaching Jesse.

"What, are you still alive?" roared Jesse.

"Yes."

Then the bandit king glared at the detective furiously.

"Fool that I am, I have given myself away," he thought.

"Yes, sir, I am alive, and from the remarks you have made I

am almost forced to believe that you were a party to the conspiracy for my death."

"What if I was?"

"I know you two now. You have played a sharp game, but I am onto you at last."

"You know me, do you, eh?" said Jesse James, while a cold, heartless laugh came on the air.

"I do."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"I say I do."

"Who am I?"

"Jesse James."

"I am Jesse James, am I?"

Nothing could be more terrible than the cool impudence of Jesse James.

He looked just as if he would delight in killing people.

"So I am the celebrated, notorious outlaw, Jesse James?"

"You are, and there is no need for you to deny it."

"Am I denying it?"

"Do you admit it?"

"Yes."

"You admit before these men that you are Jesse James?"

"Of course I do."

"Then this man at your side is your brother, Frank James?"

"Yes."

"Gentlemen, you hear the admission of these men. They are the James Boys, the famous Missouri banditti, for whom there is a fabulous reward offered."

"Oh, yes, I assure you, sir, they have all heard that."

"Jesse James, you are my prisoner."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you laugh, do you?"

"Yes."

The detective walked down to Jesse's side, and placing one hand on the bandit's arm, began to draw a pistol with the other.

But at this moment Buck Bragg and John Bender seized him from behind.

"What does this mean?" asked Ike Saunders.

"It means that you are our prisoner," cried Buck.

"I?"

"Yes."

"What have I done?"

"We allow no detectives in No Man's Land."

"But—but, gentlemen, I will hire you—I will buy you."

"Hush, you can't buy one side of us now; keep silent, for we are not to be trifled with."

"Neither am I."

By a tremendous effort the detective shook them off, and proceeded to draw his revolver, when Jesse James, by one tremendous blow from his fist, leveled him flat on the ground.

"There, boys, now disarm him!" cried Jesse.

It was but a few moments before the detective was disarmed.

"Feel in his pockets and you will find a pair of handcuffs which he is so fond of putting on other people."

"I've got 'em," said Bender.

"Put them on."

Click!

Click!

The handcuffs were clasped on his wrists, and the detective was a prisoner.

"Tie his feet."

This was quickly done, and when the detective recovered from the stunning effects of the blow he found himself a prisoner hard and fast.

"Well, now, Frank, how do you feel?" asked Jesse, turning to his brother, who had just begun to recover.

"I will be all right soon."

"How did that fellow attack you?"

"He jumped out of the window onto me."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes."

"It was Oliver Davis," said Jesse James.

"That was the man."

"He had just jumped inter ther house through that air busted winder, and knocked ther glass o' pizen licker from the hands o' ther detective," put in John Bender.

"So, after all, it was the criminal whom I sought that saved my life," thought the detective.

"Well, that was one case of returning good for evil," said Jesse James. "He has been for months hunting for Oliver Davis to take him back to the State of Ohio and hang him, and now Oliver comes to his rescue."

"'Twon't do no good," put in Buck Bragg, "we got him now."

"Well, boys," said Jesse James, "the detective is in your hands, and you can do with him just as you please. As for Frank and I, we have other matters on hand."

"Some o' ther boys 'll be hyar direckly, an' we'll string him up," said Buck Bragg.

Jesse and Frank hurried away from the scene, leaving the detective alone with men who were more like vultures than human beings.

CHAPTER XV.

OLIVER SAVES THE DETECTIVE.

The detective realized that he was in a desperate strait. His enemies had him completely in their power, and they were the cruelest men the world has ever known.

A detective in their power was in as much danger as a lamb in the jaws of a hungry tiger.

"Wall, boys," said John Bender, "wot yer goin' to do now?"

"Wait till Weeks Beeman an' the others come up, an' then we'll see wot they'll do."

"I know!"

"Hang him!"

"Bet they will!"

The detective heard this very unfavorable speculation as to his future fate, and his blood almost ran cold, but he was silent. To speak or show the least weakness would only make his fate worse.

There is even in death a sort of noble dignity to the man who can die game, which the worst savage on earth will respect.

Dark was the night, dark the thoughts of the murderers, and dark despair settled down over the soul of the doomed man.

Buck Bragg and John Bender were talking near him.

Although they spoke in undertones, they were near enough for him to catch what they said.

The conversation had gone on for several moments before the prisoner gave any heed to it, but at last he opened his ears, as he heard Bender say:

"Him rescue this feller?"

"Yes," answered Buck Bragg.

"Ah, yer sick!"

"No, I ain't."

"Why d'yer think he'd be goin' fur ter rescue ther man wot wanted ter take him back ter Ohio an' hang him?"

"Yes."

"Stuff!"

"Yer don't know Ol, John."

"Guess I know human people."

"Yer don't. Didn't yer see him jump right in thar an' knock ther glass o' pizen out o' his hand?"

"In course I did."

"Wall, did that save his life?"

"Yes."

"Ol air one o' them fellers wot believes in doin' good fur evil. Now, I don't take no way to that kind o' soft soap business. Ef a feller boosts me on ther snoot, I jist wanter turn erbout an' boost him right back."

"What have I done to either of you, that you want to pay me back?" said the detective.

"Hain't we told yer?" cried John. "Yer came hyar ter pry around an' ketch some o' our boys."

"I did not come to catch you."

"No, not me; but yer came ter ketch some others."

"Is Oliver your friend?"

"No."

"He is the one I was after."

"War yer, well I want ter tell yer, my good feller, fur's he goes yer welcome ter him. But I heerd a story once, an' yer put me mightily in mind o' it. 'Twar erbout two roosters wat got ter fightin', an' one rooster everlastin'ly wiped off the countenance o' ther earth with tother'n. Now, the chicken wot got sich a lickin' war mad, an' went off an' found a hungry fox an' told him he knowed whar a big, fat cock war fast asleep."

"The fox war glad to know it, and he follered ther cock wot got licked till he came to the cock asleep, an' jumped on him and eat him up; t'other cock a-crowin' all ther time. Arter the fox had et him up, he turned erround, an' jumpin' on the crowin' cock, he et him, too. Now, yer mought do jest like that air fox. Least-ways, we hain't er goin' ter trust yer at all—d'yar see?"

"I don't ask you to trust me."

"Wall, air yer goin' ter begin ter whine?"

"No."

"'Twon't do yer no good."

"I know it, and when the time comes you will find me meeting my fate without a murmur, but I cannot refrain from protesting against this cold-blooded, treacherous murder."

"Don't yer do it yerself?"

"No."

"Yer do."

"I don't. You have been a base traitor and deceived me."

"How?"

"I trusted you—employed you to help me."

His sentence was ended by a chuckle from John Bender.

"What are you laughing at?" he asked.

"Yer think yer got tuk in?"

"I was not taken in by shrewdness, nor by cunning, but by deception. Men whom I trusted basely deserted me."

"Hyar come ther others," said Buck Bragg to John, at this moment.

"Ah, they are comin', be they?"

"Good, now we'll soon git this yer squabble over with in er hurry."

Two low-browed, fiendish-looking ruffians, attended by a negro carrying a torch in one hand and a rope in the other, at this moment came upon the scene.

"Wall, John, yer got some work on hand?" asked a short, dark-skinned villain.

"Right yer air, Lige."

"Wot is it?"

"Hang that feller."

Elijah Hargess, who always acted as chief executioner at No Man's Land, was a sin-hardened monster. He cared no more for taking human life than he would for killing a snake or jack-rabbit.

Before the war Elijah Hargess, as he was known, lived in the northern part of the State of Missouri. During the war he joined the guerrillas, and rapidly drifted into a thief and murderer. He was a lover of good horses, and had stolen many.

He left a wife and three children with Anglin, his father-in-law, and never returned to them.

Thus we find him at this day the most desperate man in No Man's Land.

"Hello, sir," he cried, slapping the detective in the face, "who ar' ye, anyway?"

The detective, manacled as he was, struck back at him and hit with both hands on his face.

"Demons seize you!" roared Elijah, and he administered a kick on the shins of the prisoner.

The detective sank helpless on the ground, aching with pain.

"He's got grit, Lige," said John.

"Yes, I'm glad on it, though. Now I'll relish seein' him swing more'n I would a done ef he hadn't a gin me that air love tap."

The detective sat silent and motionless.

"Got everything, Lige?" asked John.

"Yes."

"Grease yer rope?"

"I did."

"Never fail in that, do yer?"

"No, I tell yer, John, thar's nothin' that kin equal a greased rope. It slips down over a feller's guzzle jest as slick ez kin be, an' when it comes ter drawin' on it, it jist leaves him a-kickin', an' nothin' too easy! Wall, I've worked off a good many since I been hyar, but nothin' does me more good than ter put one o' them thar detective fellers wot comes a nozin' erround a fellow yer know ter dancin' on nothin'."

"Whar air yer goin' ter do it?"

"Down under ther big old oak, uv course. Why, thar ain't another ez suitable place in all o' No Man's Land ez that, lem me tell yer."

"It orter be. Thar's been many a bird tuk his last roost thar," said John Bender.

Elijah Hargess now advanced to the captive and asked:

"Air yer ready?"

"Yes."

"Sed all yer want say?"

"I have."

"Come on."

"I will stay here."

"Git up."

"Where do you want me?"

"Down under ther hill."

"Carry me there."

"Look ee hyar, git up er by ginger, I'll put an end ter yer right hyar, lem me tell yer," and Elijah Hargess snatched from his belt his revolver, which he cocked and leveled at the face of the detective.

Ike Saunders sat coolly looking into the muzzle of the revolver. A torch held by the negro threw a flickering light upon the face of the prisoner, which was deathly pale.

"Hain't yer skeered o' me?" asked Lige, lowering his pistol.

"No."

"D'yer want ter die?"

"I'd rather live."

"Yer would?"

"Yee."

"O' course yer would. Hev yer got a wife an' children?"

"I have."

"Whar?"

"In Chicago."

"Wall, I'd like ter send 'em any word yer want sent 'em."

"I have none to send."

The face of the prisoner presented a fine picture of stoicism. He sat unmoved, and the ignorant, illiterate butcher stood abashed and almost cowed before him.

"Why don't you shoot, if you are going to?" said the detective.

"I ain't ergoin' ter gin yer a choice o' how ye'll die. Hyar, boys, pick 'im up an' come on."

Two of the banditti took up the captive on their shoulders as if he had been nothing but a toy, and carried him along to the tree.

"Thar, dump him down, said the executioner.

Saunders was dropped not very gently to the ground.

"Lem me kick 'im fur not walkin'," said one of the men who had carried him.

"Gin it to him!"

Then the detective received two or three kicks which almost made him scream out in pain.

But determined not to show any signs of pain, he withheld his shriek, and bore his misery in silence.

Lige was busy getting his rope ready.

He carefully tested the noose and strength of the knot with all the skill of an expert, and with a most diabolical grin assured the by-standers that it was strong enough to hang an ox.

"Now, Lige, put it erround his neck; it allers does me good ter see yer put it erround the neck ov a feller, ye do it with sich a scientific hand."

"Bet I kin. Hold on hyar, my kolt—no kickin'," said Lige, as he approached the detective.

But Saunders was not easily managed. Hoping to irritate Lige into shooting him, he kicked him in the stomach, for a moment doubling him up on the ground.

"Tie his feet, cuss him!" groaned Lige, from his position on the ground.

Two of his associates seized the detective's legs and tied them hard and fast.

When they had done this, they said he was ready.

"All right now, I'll hev that air rope erbout his neck so quick he won't know it," said the executioner, and hurrying to the prisoner, he placed the noose over his neck.

Now to throw the other end of the rope over a limb was but the work of a moment.

The detective gazed on the proceedings with calm and unmoved features. In a few minutes the feat had been accomplished, and Hargess and John seized the rope.

"Air yer ready, high kicker, ter kick nothin'?"

"Yes."

"Wall, hyar goes!"

The two men gave a downward pull on the rope which elevated the detective in the air.

Crack!

With a yell, John Bender fell, shot through the head. For a moment he lay on the ground, every muscle contracted in agony, his mouth open, and the blood flowing from a small wound in the side of his forehead.

Then, with a half groan and half sigh he gave a few spasmodic kicks, which grew more and more feeble until he was still forever.

Lige Hargess was alone on the scene.

His companions had fled at the first shot, and were nowhere in sight.

After gazing at his fallen companion until his struggles ceased in death, he cried:

"Wall, concern me ef I'm ergoin' ter stand this any longer! I'll not stay alone," and he ran for life.

Mr. Saunders, who had been considerably choked, lay on the ground just recovering when the bushes parted and Oliver Davis, followed by Old Hoss, with smoking rifle in his hand, appeared.

"He, he, he! boy, throwed 'im cold fust whack!" chuckled Old Hoss. "My old rifle don't speak fur nuthin', lem me tell yer. Every time she talks she sez suthin'."

"You are free, sir," said Oliver, releasing the detective.

"For the second time I owe my life to you," returned Saunders.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT CRESCENT.

"We have no time for congratulations or thanks," said Oliver. "I can assure you that the danger is not over."

"They will of course return with reinforcements?"

"Yes, and the sooner we get away the better."

"Lem me put in another cartridge, fur thar's nothin' like goin' loaded," said Old Hoss.

At this moment the Chinaman came tumbling through the bushes to the side of Oliver, giving vent to the pleasant ejaculations:

Glolee! glolee! Mellikan man safe. Killee big bulley. He beatee Sing—no good—no go to Josh House."

"Keep quiet, Lee Sing."

"Golly, me kleep still, only me slay glolee—bully good!"

"Now, Mr. Saunders, there is a Winchester and pair of revolvers by that dead man. You will need them before you get out of this wilderness. You need not flatter yourself that this trouble is over."

"I don't."

Oliver had, with a key which he found in Mr. Saunders' pocket, unlocked his handcuffs, and Davy had cut the rope about his legs.

Having freed him, he put the weapons in his hands, and told him to defend himself.

"One moment, young man."

"Well?"

"Where are you going?"

"To my home—my hiding place."

"Might I ask permission to go with you?"

The young man paused, and leaning against a tree, said:

"I know who you are. You are an officer who has come a thousand miles to drag me back to the States to hang me. I committed a crime which, though justified in the sight of heaven, the law punishes with death. Mr. Saunders, I admire your courage. I cannot blame you for what you do, but I will die before I will go back."

"You don't understand me," said Saunders.

"Pray explain yourself."

"I understand your position only too well. I will die before I will betray you. I am your friend, and will give my life defending you."

"But you are a detective?"

"But I swear I will not arrest you. You have twice saved my life, and henceforth I am your friend."

By the ring in his manly voice, Oliver knew he was in earnest, and he hesitated no longer.

"Come on!" he said.

From that moment they were the best of friends.

The detective was a bold, daring man, with a generous, warm heart, as all brave men have, and he made the young man who had saved his life the object of his attentions from that time on.

"Where are you going to take me?"

"To my home for the present, then we will go to Crescent."

"I want to get my horse."

"Where is he?"

"In the ravine over the hill, tied to a black walnut."

"I will send for him."

He called Lee Sing to him, and sent the Chinaman after the horse.

A Chinaman does not take to American horses very much, and he seldom cares to ride one, but Lee Sing was an exception from the rule. He would have done whatever his master required him to do, be it ever so difficult.

Consequently, when he asked him to bring the horse of the detective, Lee Sing hastened to do his bidding, ready to fight any of the white men who should try to hinder him.

When Oliver had taken his guest to his house, he bade him be seated.

"You look pale and care-worn," said Oliver.

"I am tired."

"When did you taste food last?"

"Not since the night you escaped our camp."

"I will get you some at once."

"Now, pilgrim, I dun know but what I mought make myself useful," said Davy. "I kinder think it'd be well enough fur us ter hev a feller out hyar on guard."

"You are right, Davy."

"Wall, whar'd yer go ter find one more suitable than ther great only an' original descendant o' ther sweet singer o' Israel, which is me."

"Go, Davy."

"Handsome Davy air gone. Old Hoss will be thar, and lem me tell yer t'won't be healthy tryin' ter walk on his trail. He'll pizen every inch o' ground he travels over, sure ez yer livin'."

Davy shouldered his Winchester, and went out to do picket duty.

"A rather eccentric friend," said the detective.

"Yes. He is brave, impulsive, and among these people quite shrewd. Here is some food now; help yourself, and poor as it is, it may satisfy your hunger."

"You are very kind, sir."

"Don't mention it."

Oliver placed the cold venison and potatoes and bread before his guest.

"I can't help mentioning your kindness, and when I think that I was trying to drag you to the scaffold, I wonder that you spared my life at all."

"You do not understand me. I appreciate the fact that you are only an officer of the law, and in executing warrants and criminal you do your duty. The law makes me guilty."

"How could you break the law?"

"My story, Mr. Saunders, is a very sad one. I do not care to tell it now. Some other time I will tell you all, but not now. Suffice it to say that I am guilty in the eyes of the law, but innocent in the sight of heaven. The wealthy and great have hired the newspapers to slander me. Scores of witnesses are ready to swear my life away."

"Half a million dollars are ready to bribe judge and jury to hang me, but I will never be taken alive."

"I don't blame you."

"Now, you are a detective?"

"Yes."

"One of Pinkerton's force?"

"I am."

"Do you think you can put confidence in me?"

"I do."

"Will you believe me?"

"Yes."

"You came here to capture a criminal for whom there was a reward?"

"Yes."

"You wanted that reward?"

"You are just right, Mr. Davis, I came for the reward."

"I don't think your trip to No Man's Land need be a failure. There are great things for you to do, and the rewards you are to earn will be equally as great as if you had dragged my poor body back to the States for the hang-man."

"Explain yourself more fully, Mr. Davis."

"Have you heard of the James Boys?" he asked in a whisper, after having assured himself that no one was listening to him.

"Yes."

"They are here."

"I know it."

"When did you learn it?"

"To-night."

"They were your associates?"

"I am aware of that. They came here with me, and I deserve to be hanged for being such a stupid dolt!"

"No, you don't."

"Now, do you propose to help in this?"

"Yes," was the answer, after a moment's thoughtful silence. "In cases of ordinary criminals I would not interpose. There are men here who are poor wretches that have been driven away from their States for crimes committed in drunken frenzy, or in rage. They are to be pitied, but not so with the James Boys."

"You are correct. I know them now, after having been with them for weeks."

"They are cool, deliberate villains, who kill for gain and rob for hate. They kill because they love to do so, and though in Missouri, among their friends, it would hardly be probable that a jury could be found that would hang them, yet that jury shall have an opportunity to disgrace itself if it will."

"Good! It shall."

"Now let us proceed to plan how we will act."

"Have you any plan?"

"No, not yet. Have you?"

"No. Where is the nearest town?"

"Crescent."

"Where is it, in Kansas?"

"No."

"Texas?"

"No, a small place northwest of here in New Mexico."

"They will go there."

"Do you think so?"

"I know it. I heard them talking of going there. They did not dream that I heard them. It seems they've got some sort of a scheme up which I could not understand."

"You overheard them talking about it?"

"Yes."

"Could you get any part of it?"

"Only a few words."

"What do you think it was about?"

"A girl."

"Her name?"

"Yes, they called her name, but I can't think of it."

"Was it Minnie Potter?"

"That's it."

"Didn't they plan an abduction?"

"Yes, and were going to the nearest town, which was no doubt Crescent, to wait until they could get Dick Little, Jim Connors and Ed McMillan here; then they will carry her away. It seems to be Jesse's purpose to marry her."

"Do you know why?"

"Oh, there is big money somewhere in it."

"Mr. Saunders, there is far more money in this than in capturing me."

"You understand it, then?"

"I know all about it."

"Let us help the girl."

At this moment Lee Sing entered greatly excited. The horses were ready, and Mellikan men from the town were coming to kill them.

"There is not a moment to lose," said Oliver. "We must mount and ride for life to Crescent. It will all blow over in a few days."

In five minutes the detective and the man whom he had come to the West to arrest were mounted and riding as rapidly as their horses could carry them to Crescent.

Two days later they reached the city and secured a room in a hotel.

That evening, as they were sitting talking in their room about their plans, Oliver thought he heard a suspicious noise outside the window.

He arose, and, turning down the lamp quite low, placed it under the table so as to give forth no light, and then on tiptoe crept to the window.

Carefully he pulled the curtain aside.

As he did so his eye caught sight of a dark form apparently leaning against the window. There was a flash, a stunning report, the jingling of glass, and Oliver Davis fell to the floor.

CHAPTER XVII.

THROUGH THE WHIRLWIND.

For a single second horror and consternation held the detective dumb, but it was only for a second. He recovered himself, leaped to the window, revolver in hand, and fired two shots at the retreating form of a man.

It is needless to say without success, for the man continued to retreat, and disappeared behind the house.

"Well, poor fellow, has he hurt you bad?" said the detective.

"No, no. I am only stunned."

"Not killed?"

"No."

Oliver was on his feet in a moment.

The bullet had not struck him at all, but a fragment of the window pane torn off by the bullet had struck him on the forehead and knocked him down.

"Who was it?" asked the detective.

"Jesse James."

"You saw his face?"

"No."

"Then how know you it was he?"

"It was his form, his size I know, I cannot be mistaken," said Oliver. "Dark as it was, I made out the form of the man."

Mr. Saunders was not slow in forming his resolution. He quickly reloaded the empty chamber of his revolver, and said:

"Oliver, are you willing to make a bold effort?"

"Yes."

"Are you able?"

"I am."

"To strike at once?"

"To strike at once—lead on the way!"

"All right. Draw your revolvers and come on. Don't lose a moment's time."

They drew a revolver apiece, and both crept down the stairway to the front door.

It was only a small hotel, and they had been in the second story.

The man firing the shot through the window had been in the top of a tree, which grew close against the side of the house.

"Now, halt a moment, Oliver, until I give you final instructions," said the detective.

"Well, I am waiting."

After looking carefully about to the right and left, to see that no one was in sight, the detective whispered:

"You go to the right, and I will go to the left. Run fast, and don't let them escape."

They ran around the house as rapidly as they could and met, but not a sign of any one was to be seen.

"This is rather singular, Mr. Saunders," said Oliver.

"Yes."

"They are not far."

At this very moment Jesse James was crouching behind a pig pen not fifty paces from the house.

"I missed him," said the bandit king. "My bullet failed to do its work, but Oliver Davis and Ike Saunders, you had better be careful."

He spoke in a low, hard, hissing whisper. He gritted his teeth in his potent rage, and trembled in every limb.

There was never a time that Jesse James was more deadly, more dangerous than when he had just failed in some enterprise.

Click!

Click!

He cocked his revolver, and if ever the eyes of man gleamed with the fury of a demon, it was his.

Some one was approaching him from behind.

Jesse heard the soft, cat-like tread, and no tiger ever turned at bay more readily than he.

"Hold, Jess!" whispered a voice, just as he had covered a dark form that was stealthily approaching him.

"Frank!"

"Yes, it's I."

"Brother, you have come at an opportune time."

"Jess, were you fighting up at the hotel?"

Their conversation was, of course, in a faint whisper, and Frank had by this time joined his brother.

"Yes."

"Hit anybody?"

"No."

"Nor get shot?"

"A slight scratch, but it amounts to nothing."

"Well, Jesse, we must get away from here."

"Why?"

"All Crescent is aroused. They have learned in some way that we are in the town, and it was me who won the big haul at poker. They will string us up if they find us."

"See, Frank!" whispered Jesse, seizing his brother's arm and pulling him around the pig pen and pointing to the detective and Oliver Davis coming toward the pen. "They come, Frank—they come!"

"Yes, and we must go."

"Not till I have killed them."

"No, Jesse, you must not think of that!" said Frank.

"Why?"

"To fire another shot will bring all the town on us. Listen!"

A wild roar at this moment issued from another part of the town, and a score of men with guns, torches and pistols could be seen running about the streets.

"Ha, down 'em! Shoot 'em down like dogs wherever ye find 'em!" said one man.

"No, hang 'em up! The James Boys deserve to be hung."

"Do you hear that, Jess?"

"Yes."

"Now, don't you think it policy for us to get out of here as soon as we can?"

"Of course."

"There is no time to fight now."

"Where are the horses, Frank?"

"I got them out of the barn, Jesse, and they are behind the big white house at the end of the street. If we can only get to them, we will be safe."

"Yes, once on the back of my noble Siroc, and I can bid defiance to every man on the border. Then, my brother, we can ride through a whirlwind of bullets and not be touched."

"The sooner we get on our horses the better!" said Frank, "and let us lose no time."

Their pursuers were between them and their animals, and they determined to make a circuit around them, if possible, and reach Siroc and Malone.

The town of Crescent was scattered along both sides of a hill. It was essentially a mining town, which had sprung up suddenly, and was in the edge of a wood.

The house behind which the horses had been concealed by Frank James was in the suburbs of the little town, on the opposite side from them. In order to reach their horses they would have to run a gauntlet of spies and guards behind every fence and house.

"Keep a sharp lookout everywhar!" cried a voice, which they recognized as the sheriff's. "Don't yer let 'em give yer ther slip, or by ginger they'll be out an' gone like Darby's eye!"

"Come, Frank."

Jesse set his teeth hard, and they ran crouching almost to the ground, as they ran along the fence.

There came a shot from up the hill, and a bullet struck the fence.

A chorus of wild yells went up on the air. Another and another shot was heard, and bullets rattled against the fence.

"Up this alley, Frank! Now run for it!"

They were seen by the men on the hill, who sought to head them off, but the James Boys were fleet.

Oliver and the detective joined the pursuers, shouting at the top of their voices.

"The James Boys! The James Boys! Ten thousand dollars reward for their capture!"

We doubt if it was as much the thought of aiding the enforcement of the law, or the hope of the reward that stimulated the mob to strive to capture Frank and Jesse James, as the fact that they had swindled in a game of poker.

Jesse and Frank strained every muscle, not stopping to return a shot until they had gained their horses, and then to mount was but the work of a second.

"Now for it, Frank!" roared Jesse.

They each took their reins in their mouth, and with a revolver in each hand, wheeled their horses about and dashed right down among their pursuers.

A whirlwind of bullets greeted them, but they who had been schooled in battle heeded them not. On, on, on they dashed, right through the whirlwind, by some miracle escaping unhurt.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT NO MAN'S LAND.

"They are gone, Mr. Saunders!" cried Oliver, as he saw the bandit brothers unharmed gallop away from the town. "They have escaped us."

"For the present they have, but we will get them yet."

"Do you think they will return to Missouri?"

"I don't know. We will follow them."

"No, not me. You may."

"Why not you go also?"

"Because I dare not venture within the pale of civilization. I dare not go to any State lest I should in some unlucky moment be discovered and carried back to Ohio."

"Don't you want to return to Ohio?"

"Return to Ohio—did ever a poor exile want to return to his native land? The spot which I can never more see is the dearest place on earth, but I cannot, dare not go."

The detective said no more. The two men were somewhat apart from the others, and there was little danger of their being overheard by others.

They turned about and returned to the hotel, where they found a crowd of men gathered about the bar drinking, and boasting of the scare they gave two poker players.

"They little dream who their poker players were," thought the detective.

"Let us go to our room," whispered Oliver.

A new thought had entered his mind, which filled him with dread.

She whom he would have given his life to serve might at that very moment be in danger.

The detective, seeing that he was very earnest about some matter, allowed himself to be taken up the stairway to his room, and as soon as they were in the apartment and the door locked, he asked:

"What is it, Oliver? Some new thought has been sprung in your mind. Let me know what it is."

"I think that the best thing we can do is to hasten at once to No Man's Land."

"Well, you have reason?"

"I have."

"What is it?"

"Frank and Jesse James have gone there, I am quite sure, to abduct Minnie Potter. Their coming here was but a blind. John Bender is out of the way, and they have no one now to divide up that fortune with, which they expect to get with the girl. They are going to act at once."

"And you think they have gone to No Man's Land?"

"Oh, sir, I am quite sure of it."

"Then we will go."

"Let us go at once."

"Can't we wait until morning?"

"No, we must go now, at this very moment."

"Very well, if you think the case so urgent."

"Let us order our horses."

"Sit still and try to collect yourself. I will go and order the horses myself," said the detective. He rose and hurried from the room.

In his bitter anxiety each moment seemed an age to the anxious Oliver.

At last the detective returned with the information that the horses were ready as soon as he cared to go.

"I am ready to start at once," said Oliver.

"Don't ride too fast," said the detective, as Oliver galloped away at the top of his horse's speed.

"But we seem to go so slow."

"Slow? Why, you are running your horse down, Oliver. He will be so winded that he won't last ten miles."

"They have the start of us."

"Yes, and will beat us there in spite of all we can do. Even if we had ten miles the start, we would have no show against such steeds as the James Boys ride. Their horses are uncommon. They are like winged steeds, and no power can outrun them, save steam."

"Well, you don't know how anxious I am," said the young man, checking in his horse. "I wish I was there now. Oh, how I wish I was there!"

"We are many miles away, and even the famous Siroc and Jim Malone could not run all the distance. Be reasonable, and ride at a slower gait."

The anxious Oliver knew that it was best to obey the command of his friend, and consequently he reined in his horse.

They rode all night at an easy canter, and got over considerable ground.

It was late in the evening of the second day when they reached the vicinity of No Man's Land.

"Where will we go?" asked the detective. "We dare not, at least, I dare not, go to Claybank."

"Neither do I think it safe to go there myself," said Oliver. "Let us go first to my own house, and see what I can learn there."

"Will you find any one there?"

"Yes. My faithful Chinaman will be near. I can summon him."

"How?"

"By running up a green bough or bunch of grass to the top of the tall pole you saw on the hill."

"Well, you seem to have an excellent head for scheming," laughed the detective.

They were riding along a path which led through a dense wood. Suddenly Oliver, who now seemed alive to every sense of danger, drew rein.

"Stop, Mr. Saunders."

"What do you see?"

"A danger signal. Do you see that bit of red flannel tied to the bush?"

"That means that it is certain death to proceed."

"Well, what are we to do?"

Before Oliver could answer there came from the woods on the right a peculiar whistle.

"We will wait," he said.

"Very well, if you say so."

They halted, and in a few moments they heard the tramp of feet coming through the woods.

"Some one approaches!" whispered Saunders, drawing his revolver.

"It's a friend."

"Are you sure?"

"See for yourself."

The bushes parted, and the Chinaman sprang out into the road. He raised his hand as a signal of caution, and admonished them by various pantomimic signs to keep quiet.

"Come here, Lee."

"Mellikan man greatee danger," said the Chinaman, coming close to the side of Oliver.

"Is he?"

"Yessie."

"What has happened, Lee Sing? Tell me all."

"Gleat many; bigee clowd gittee in saloon. talker, cusse, say killee Mellikan, by Josh, wen him come home. Lee Sing him slay nothin' muchee. Belly soon long come Hansomee Davee: he slay no killee, by Josh, an' then they fightee. Big Davee turnee upee two toes to daisies belly well."

"What became of Dave?"

"Runnee offee in woods. No follow Davee—'fraid of his bigee gun."

"We must find Dave and get a more distinct account of the affair."

"Wall, chaw me up fur bar meat ef ther ain't Ol come back!" cried a voice at this moment, and Handsome Davy leaped out into the road.

CHAPTER XIX.

SOME TROUBLE.

"Dave, there has been some trouble?" said Oliver.

"Yer right, pilgrim, thar hez been a leetle speck, an' thar appears ter be a right smart chance fur a good deal more."

"I am sorry, Dave, that I got you implicated."

"Hold on, pilgrim, jist yer hold on right thar! Dun yer go ter reusin' yer awakenin' conscience by any sich feelin's as them, fur lem me tell yer now, once an' fur all, that I'm so peculiarly constertooted thet I thrive on trouble. Why, pilgrim, ef I didn't hev my leetle periodical fuss I'd begin ter mope an' lose flesh faster'n ef I'd been er drinkin' er gallon o' anti-fat er day. I'm happy now, happy jist 'cause I'm likely ter hev a racket. Oh, jist see how happy I am!"

And the eccentric old fellow dashed off a quick step to a few chuckle.

"You certainly look happy, Davy."

"Look it: why, I'm happiness itself!"

"Dave, have you seen those two men back here?"

"Who?"

"The men we thought were Frank and Jesse James, and who were Frank and Jesse James."

"Yes."

"When?"

"Ter-day."

"Where?"

"They are up at Claybank hanging erround ther saloon."

"Do you know when they got here?"

"This mornin'."

"When did you see Minnie Potter last?"

"This mornin'."

"You have been guarding her, have you?"

"Yer kin bet I did, pilgrim. I saw yer tuk an almighty ermound o' interest in that air gal, an' by ther boots o' Gumpshan Cute, anything yer take a interest in interests me."

"They haven't found her yet?"

"Who?"

"The James Boys."

"Not much!"

"Well, Dave, that is their object here, to carry off that poor girl, and we must prevent their doing so at all hazards."

"I'm right hyar—this is all thar is o' me, an' that's er sayin' a good deal when it comes ter a fight. I tell yer, friend, I kin sling lead erbout ez fast ez any one."

"Where are you going now? What had we better do?"

"Ain't yer hungry?" asked Davy.

"Yes," interposed the detective. "We are both as hungry as wolves."

"Wall, come ter ther shanty."

"Will it be safe there?" asked the detective.

"Safe ez anywhar. Lee—hyar, Lee Sing!"

"Yessee, Davee."

"Git right ter ther shanty, an' show how expeditious yer cul-lernery skill kin be when it comes ter hustlin'!"

"Allee lite!"

"Look er hyar, merhogany face, d'yer know wot yer goin' ter do?"

"No, Mellikan slay hustle. No savah whattee Mellikan mean hustle."

"Sure nuff. I'd furgot that yer benighted mind warn't capable o' takin' in a figger o' speech. Wall, I mean fur yer ter git suthin' ter eat."

"Allee lite, cookie."

"That's it—hurry."

"Allee lite."

"Go—git!" and he gave the Chinaman a push that sent him headlong into the bushes in the direction of the hut.

"Now, my sufferin' feller creechers, I kinder think thet that air merhogany-skinned dude o' a hash-slinger 'll hev suthin' hot fur yer by ther ther time we git thar, an' maybe them thar fellers from Claybank 'll make it still hotter afore we eat it."

"We must have some food," said the detective; "we can't go longer without it."

"No, but I am so uneasy about Minnie Potter."

"We will watch over her."

"Now, pilgrim, don't yer go ter bein' uneasy. Harnsome Davy iz got his eyes on that air gal, an' he's not ergoin' ter let any harm berfall ther leetle creetur'. I'm er regular ladies' man, I am. I'm er sort o' a dude myself, and a masher too, when it comes ter mashin' fellers heads. Let's git down ter ther shanty an' see wot that air heathen Chineese ar' erbout."

They hurried down a narrow bypath which led to the cabin.

Lee Sing had already preceded them, and with wonderful skill and celerity, remarkable in some Chinamen, had a smoking dinner on the table.

"What will we do with the horses?" asked the detective.

"Let Lee Sing take them down to the valley. Take off the saddles there, Lee, so their backs will cool while they graze."

"Me stay with um, Mellikan mans?"

"Yes."

"Belly well, takee me gun, shootee nige blow hard if come alle lite."

Lee's gun was a quaint, old-fashioned Chinese gun, which he had brought with him from China. It was stout, thick and heavy as an old-fashioned arquebus, which had to be rested on a forked rod while it was fired.

The Chinaman insisted that it was the most wonderful weapon in the world, and though he consented to have a percussion lock put on it, he would agree to no other changes, nor would he exchange it for the best rifle ever made.

"Wall, now, claw me up fur a grizzly ef ever I seed sich a fool ez that almon-eyed, merhogany-skinned dude!" said Old Hoss, or Handsome Davy. "He jist thinks he's got ther world by ther tail

whenever he starts out with that air old gun. Why, he pours a half pint o' powder in it to load it, and with six balls on that it'll kick ther everlastin' stuffin' out o' anybody what shoots it, ef it don't bust all ter fiinders and send a chap to kingdom come."

"Dave, perhaps you had better go down the road a short distance and see if any one is coming this way."

"Yer right, pilgrim, an' I'm gone jist in no time. Good-by till yer hear from me."

And seizing his Winchester rifle, he ran down the road to reconnoitre.

"Now, Mr. Saunders, here is some food which will satisfy hunger, anyway."

"It's a feast fit for a king, Oliver!"

"Draw up a chair and fall to without ceremony."

"All right, I need no ceremony. Say, Oliver," eating away with a rapidity that evinced hunger, "where did you come across that treasure of yours?"

"The Chinaman?"

"Yes."

"At Cedar Bluff, in No Man's Land."

"How did you so completely win him over to you?"

"I will tell you the story. It was but a short time after my arrival in No Man's Land. I was lonely and wretched. I was a modern Cain, flying from my accusers, and felt that I was an out-cast from earth. One day I wandered to Celar Bluff. There some wild miners were congregated and about to hang this unfortunate fellow, because it pleased heaven to make him a Chinaman. I at once pictured my own helpless, terrible fate when I should be hanged, and I determined to rescue him. With a revolver in one hand, and a keen knife in the other, I sprang among them and cut him down."

"'Cowards!' I cried. 'If any man dare harm a hair of that poor heathen's head, I will shoot him. He is my brother.' My pale face and determined mien awed them, and they allowed the Chinaman to follow me away from the town."

"He has been with me ever since, and no man ever had a more faithful friend."

Both were startled at this moment by the rapid tramp of feet.

Snatching their guns, they sprang to the door, just as Handsome Davy came up at a run.

"We're goin' ter hev it now, an' no mistake, pilgrim!" he whispered.

"Have what?"

"Some trouble."

CHAPTER XX.

A FOUR-IN-HAND GAME.

The meaning of the old man was well understood, and in a moment both Oliver and the detective had seized their guns.

"How near are they?" asked Oliver.

"Down ter ther forks o' ther big road."

"Davy, can you get the Chinaman back before they come?"

"I kin try."

"Is your house strong?"

"It's of logs, and will resist bullets," answered Oliver.

"I believe we had better risk it."

"Just as you say."

"Go, Davy, hurry and bring Lee Sing in. We will fortify and make a fight."

"All right, pilgrim, I'll gird up my loins and strike for tall timber. When I start on er tramp, I tell yer I make ther ground tremble. Look out fur an earthquake!"

Tightening his belt, he seized his gun and ran down the road at a rate of speed that would have kept a horse at his best.

"Oliver, what will we do about the horses?" asked the detective.

"We must protect them, if we can."

"How many men can they muster in No Man's Land?"

"From thirty to fifty, but I doubt if all will be against us."

The young man thought of Minnie Potter, and the recollection of her feeble, helpless condition filled him with fear and chagrin.

He was all anxiety to get away and go to her defense.

Perhaps while the attack was being made on them she was being carried off by the James Boys.

"I will go out to the path leading down to the bottom," said Oliver, "and see if I can discover Lee Sing and Dave."

"Look out."

"I will."

He left the house, his rifle in his hand, and ran swiftly down the path.

The young man reached the spot from whence he could overlook the valley, but he saw no sign of either Old Hoss or the Chinaman.

"Where are they?" he asked himself. "There are the horses, but they are not in sight. Oh, yes, I understand it now. They have

left the horses and are coming through the tall grass and bushes this side. They will soon be here."

Then he looked all about in every direction.

"Oh, how I wish I could see the house of Joe Hibbard. Is Minnie there or not?"

His great anxiety on Minnie's account quite overcame his discretion, and he determined to climb the steep to the next hill and overlook the woods to catch a glimpse of her.

He was so certain that he could get back before the attacking force came in sight, that he determined at all hazards to risk it. He ran as nimbly as he could through the woods, leaping bushes and briars, logs and stones, and at last gained the top of the hill.

Through the trees a mile or more away could be seen the gable ends of Joe Hibbard's cabin. There was no person in sight of it.

The blue smoke peacefully ascending from one of the chimneys gave evidence that some one lived in it.

"I wish I dared go nearer. But no, time flies, and they are advancing. Back to my fort."

As he wheeled about to return, his ear caught a sound like the snapping of a twig, and turning quickly, he saw a man half-hidden behind a tree aiming a gun at him.

In a second he leaped to cover of another tree.

Crack!

The bullet struck the side of the tree, barely missing him an inch.

"The conflict has commenced," thought Oliver, now panting with excitement. "What am I to do?"

Other footsteps were heard advancing, and he was not slow to decide that his best plan was flight.

Without attempting to return the shot, Oliver took to his heels and ran for life.

"Halt! halt!" roared a voice.

But he paused not.

Crack!

Bang!

Whiz—zip! came bullets through the air, clipping off the tender twigs and leaves of the bushes, and dropping them on the head and shoulders of the fugitive.

"Stop, stop there, or we will shoot you down!" roared a powerful voice from the hill.

He wheeled about, and almost without taking aim, fired a shot.

He saw a man stagger and fall.

Oliver afterward learned, however, that he had not killed or even seriously wounded the fellow, which was good news to him, for he had a great dread of committing murder.

He did not halt a single instant. Having fired a shot to check his pursuers, he ran, and ran as rapidly as he could, to the house.

The detective was standing in the door, and saw him coming. He ran out into the yard and fired a shot. At the same moment a roar like the bellow of an enraged bull reached their ears, and Old Hoss and the Chinaman appeared.

Crack! went Davy's rifle.

The Chinaman was seen to raise his short gun and take aim at something. There was a report like a cannon, a cloud of smoke, and a pair of heels in Celestial shoes went flying over a pig-tailed head, landing the Chinaman into a thorn bush.

He struggled out of his uncomfortable position, and, aided by the old hunter, regained his feet.

"Thar, yer merhogany-faced dude, mebbe ye'll hev more sense than ter fill that air cannon o' your'n full next time."

"Gollie, gollie, killee, killee both endee!" said the Chinaman.

"Get on ter ther house."

Two shots from the hill came whizzing down the woods above the heads of Old Hoss and the Chinaman.

They ran up the steep ascent as rapidly as they could, and found Oliver and the detective at the door waiting for them.

"They've come—they've come!" said Old Hoss, pantingly. "Oh, ain't it rich—I jist love 'em fur this! Ef yer only knowed how I war a-pluin' fur a scrimmage o' this kind fur ever so long!"

There was a few moments' lull and then four men could be seen coming down the hill, leaping from bush to bush.

"What, is there but four of the attacking party?" cried the detective.

"Those are all in sight," Oliver answered.

"Wall, by hokey, it air a reg'lar four-in-hand game, so et seems!" cried Old Hoss.

There was a wild shout, and then one of the four men waving a white handkerchief, said:

"If you'll give up the detective and Oliver Davis to us, the others can go."

"I know that voice," said the detective.

"It's Jesse James."

"Yes."

"What do you say to that?" Jesse again shouted.

"Not by a jug full," roared Old Hoss.

"Then we'll turn you out."

"Try it, by Jehoserphat, an' ye'll find it a reg'lar four-in-hand game. Hyar, Lee Sing, yer merhogany-skinned dude, load up yer cannon again, an' let 'em hev some more grape and canister!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE JAMES BOYS CAPTURED.

As yet no serious damage had been done. The four men drew back in the bushes for consultation.

Of course Frank and Jesse made two of the four.

"What does this mean, Frank?" Jesse asked. "Where are the others?"

Frank James turned to Buck Bragg and asked:

"What has become of the others who were to help us?"

"I dun know," Buck Bragg answered.

"Frank, we are deserted."

"I believe it."

"I know it, boys," put in Buck.

"Buck, your companions are a set of cowardly, treacherous villains."

With a low chuckle Buck answered:

"Wall, I guess yer won't git any quarrel out o' me on that air pint. They air a hard set."

"They said they would come with us and help hang the detective and Oliver, and now that they have learned there is to be a fight, we find them deserting us."

"Guess yer right."

"Jess, can we do anything against four?"

"No."

"Besides, they are in a house, fortified."

"It's about the same as two to four, Frank."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't depend on any of these knaves."

"I believe you."

"Those two will desert us."

Even while they were talking, Buck Bragg and his companion were seen to slink away and disappear in the woods.

"There, I had suspected as much!" said Jesse.

"In ten minutes," said Frank, "they will be back at the Claybank saloon of Bill Grubbs, drinking the health of Oliver Davis and the detective."

"No reliance can be put in them, Frank. In three hours the detective may have the whole gang trying to capture us."

The James Boys were sitting on the ground under some trees, their guns at their sides.

Jesse James felt most keenly the chagrin.

"Well, Jesse, what had we better do?" Frank asked. "See, the fellows in the hut are coming out."

"Mount Siroc and Jim Malone, and leave the country forever. I am tired of No Man's Land, and this shall be my last ride in the West."

"Good, I'm with you, but——"

"But what?"

"The girl?"

"Ah, I had forgotten her. She shall not escape us, though."

They arose slowly and went to the top of the great hill and looked down upon the house.

"What is that, Jess?"

"Where?"

"Look, a crowd of men coming down the road, right to the house."

The amazed bandit brothers now beheld a score of armed men, the very men who had started out with them not two hours before to capture the detective and Oliver.

They were going directly to the house.

"What can it mean?"

"It means a make up," said Jesse James. "See, they are now shaking hands with them, and as I surmised, they are ready to turn against us. Oh, such perfidy!"

"No man in No Man's Land can be trusted."

Frank James might have made this remark even broader. No man who violates the law can be trusted.

Jesse and Frank went deliberately to where Siroc and Jim Malone stood.

"Aye, my noble Siroc," said Jesse James, patting his horse on the neck. "I can depend on you. You are the only one I can trust. In sorrow or sunshine, in advance or retreat, in war and peace, my noble steed is ever the same, ever true to his master."

"Come, Jess, we've got no time to stay here."

"Where will we go for a few days, Frank?" said Jesse, deliberately vaulting into the saddle.

"I have been thinking we might go to Barney's and rest. Then we can slip back, abduct the girl, and be gone."

"All right."

They turned their horses into a path, and were riding away, when Buck Bragg suddenly leaped out before them.

"Hold on, Jess, don't go away!"

"Get out of our road."

"Now, Jess, I know what yer mad erbout. We hain't gone back on yer."

"You haven't?"

"No."

"Then what does that mean?" asked Jesse, pointing to the crowd gathered about the hut.

"Oh, them air dead beats, they overawed our boys. But I tell yer, Jess, thar air a dozen men in No Man's Land ready to go with yer."

"Since Swanson and Bender were shot down we don't know of any one whom we can trust," said Jesse.

"Can't yer trust me, Jess?"

"I don't know."

"I tell yer I am not with 'em, neither is John Simmons nor Del. Morgan, nor eight others. Why, they may hang us. We air going to rendezvous for a few days down on Persimmon Creek; come thar ef yer want us ter help yer."

Jesse James was not in a very good humor, and consequently a little hasty.

"I will see about it," he said, as he and Frank galloped away.

They went to Barney, where they both shaved their beards and mustaches off and further disguised themselves.

Under the names of land speculators they put up at a hotel.

Siroc and Jim Malone were stabled, and after their long flight, enjoyed the season of rest that was granted them.

But were Jesse and Frank James safe?

No.

The wicked are never safe.

Even at that moment two desperate men were following their trail, with all the persistence and determination of sleuth hounds.

Oliver and the detective day after day followed their footsteps, tracing them to Barney.

Disguised as cattle men they entered the town and put up at the same hotel where Jesse and Frank were stopping.

A day had elapsed when Oliver reported to the detective that he had found them, and that he was quite certain that their own presence was not suspected.

They waited until night came, and by this time both had penetrated the disguises of the James Boys.

"Now, Oliver, to get to their room."

"I know where it is."

"Do both sleep in one room?"

"Yes, and in one bed."

"How do you know this?"

"I learned it from a servant girl."

"Then our work is half done," said the detective.

"Do you think so?"

"Of course. All it needs now is a stealthy tread, a true hand, and a clear head, and we shall succeed."

"Good—we will succeed then!"

They were lodged one story above the apartment in which the James Boys slept.

It was midnight.

Both were up and dressed. Oliver had a revolver in one hand and dark lantern in the other. They crept slowly and noiselessly down the stairway, pausing at the head to remove their boots. Ike Saunders had a revolver in each hand.

The door of the James Boys' room was locked, and Saunders, who had provided for that, drew a skeleton key and silently unlocked it.

They softly entered the room. Heavy breathing told them that some one slept.

Softly they approached the bed.

"Surrender!" roared the detective, and the James Boys started up to find two men over them with cocked revolvers in their faces, while the rays of a dark lantern streamed over them.

Resistance was useless.

They surrendered, and in five minutes were prisoners in irons.

CHAPTER XXII.

A RESCUE—MINNIE ABDUCTED.

The exultation felt by the detective and Oliver at the capture of the James Boys can be better imagined than described. They were very quiet, however, and said nothing that would evince exultation.

The prisoners were sullen and morose.

"What will we do with them now?" Oliver asked the detective.

"I have been thinking of that," said the detective, thoughtfully, "and I think we had better go to some railroad station in Texas."

"I cannot go with you."

"Why?"

"I must avoid Texas."

"True, I had forgotten. Well, we will go to Persimmon Creek, where your friends, Davy and the Chinaman are. I can secure their aid, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, without trouble."

"They will be enough to help me until we get to some civilized part of the world."

"You could not ask for a better pair: Old Hoss is a host in himself."

"And that Chinaman's gun ought to drive off an army. Why, it is almost equal to small artillery!" laughed Ike Saunders.

"It is."

They went back to their rooms, taking the prisoners, and then roused the landlord.

Everything had been accomplished so quietly that the household had not been disturbed.

When they had succeeded in rousing the landlord, Ike said:

"We want an early breakfast."

"Why, wot in Moses' name hev yer been a doin'?" asked the landlord.

"We have simply been taking in a precious pair of rascals, that is all."

"Who—wot they done?"

"They are road agents," put in Oliver.

The fat old landlord stared for a moment in open-mouthed wonder, then fell into a chair, and looked as if he had suddenly fallen into a trance from which he would not soon recover.

"Wall—wall—wall, I be blamed!" he growled.

"Say, old man," cried the detective, going to his side and seizing his arm and giving him a shake, "Do you know what I said?"

"No."

"I want an early breakfast for four."

"Yer do?"

"We all do."

"Wall, ye kin hev it. Wait till mornin', won't yer?"

"It is nearly morning now. We must be on the march before daylight."

"You are right," Oliver whispered. "We must be moving before daylight. If we wait until daylight they may have friends and sympathizers who will give us trouble."

"He had better wake his cooks at once and get to getting our breakfast."

"Yes."

"Oliver, go with him. See that he don't get out and give us away, and have the cooks roused, then we can get breakfast and be off before daylight."

"Can you guard the two prisoners?"

"Oh, yes."

Oliver went with the landlord, making him rouse the cooks, and watched the cooks until they had a smoking breakfast. Then he sent the landlord up to summon the detective and prisoners.

All sat down and ate quite heartily.

Just as the first streaks of day began to illumine the eastern horizon, the two outlaws were placed on their horses securely bound, and with Ike Saunders by the side of Jesse James and Oliver at the side of Frank James, they rode away at a gallop.

All day long they traversed a prairie road, and at night they came upon the wood which fringed the banks of Persimmon Creek.

Here they halted and proceeded to let their prisoners down from their horses to rest and take some food.

While Oliver guarded the prisoners the detective was busy making a fire.

Suddenly a wild, ferocious yell went up on the air, making the very heavens tremble, and three rifles rang out.

"Indians!" cried Saunders.

"No, it's not!" answered Oliver.

Then they snatched their guns and sprang to cover.

Half a dozen dark forms dressed like Indians and painted, with feathers in their hair, were to be seen dancing and yelling all about them like so many demons.

It was a startling scene.

Bullets and arrows whizzed through the air.

The detective and Oliver, each with their guns, fought desperately, but were driven back, back, and the prisoners at last rescued.

It seemed as if the James Boys were destined never long to remain prisoners.

Jesse and Frank had, of course, been rescued by white men disguised as Indians.

Buck Bragg and Lew Bright were their leaders.

Buck, as the reader will remember, had been wounded by Minnie Potter in the pursuit after Oliver. His shoulder was almost healed, but he had a wholesome dread of the plucky girl who was such an excellent marksman.

"Wall, Jesse, I told yer that we'd do't—we'd rescue yer," said

the villain, when Jesse and Frank had been taken some distance up Persimmon Creek.

"Have you our horses, Buck?" Jesse asked.

"Yes, yer bet!"

"Well, I'm glad of that."

"Course yer air. Couldn't git erlong without Siroc."

"Now, get these handcuffs off our hands."

"Not er very easy thing ter do, Jess. I'm blamed ef them fellers didn't put 'em on ter stay, lem me tell yer!"

"So it seems. But we must have them off."

"Wait till we git ter Claybank."

"Dare we go back?"

"Oh, yes. We're on top now, an' all's on our side, yer see."

Claybank seemed constantly taking changes, and it was often difficult to tell whether one was in favor of that oscillating city or not.

But Jesse and Frank went back, reaching the town by noon next day, and the irons were quickly knocked off their hands.

"Now, Frank," said Jesse, "let us seize the girl and away as soon as it is dark."

"All right—how can we?"

"From what I have been able to gather, she is at Joe Hibbard's, and I think we can induce her to come out."

"How?"

"Play the old woman trick, Frank. You know you are a good actor, and can play the old woman to perfection."

Then Jesse laid his plan of operation before Frank, who very readily approved of it.

It was growing late, already dusk.

Poor Minnie Potter had just stepped to the door of Joe Hibbard's cabin to get a breath of fresh air, when she espied an old woman coming toward her. She was old, and seemingly lame and decrepit.

"Be yer Minnie Potter?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Wall, a young man who is wounded an' e'en most er dyin' up thar in ther woods, wants yer."

"Who is it?" asked Minnie.

"His name be—his name be—lemme see wot his name be—Oh, yes, I hev it. His name is Oliver Davis."

"Oh, Ol—poor Ol, wounded and dying. Take me to him, please, take me to him at once!"

"Come right along."

The old hag turned about, and leaning heavily on her staff, shambled away, the girl following her.

She had gone perhaps half a mile, when a man suddenly leaped from the side of the road, seized her and with a hand clasped over her mouth to prevent her screaming, leaped on a horse and galloped away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FRANK JAMES INSANE.

As soon as she could recover her breath the girl set up a series of shrieks and screams.

"Hold on, you witch, that won't do!" cried Frank.

"What are you going to do, villain?" she cried.

"Aha, my little dear, you are a little treasure that we are going to keep."

"Let me go, scoundrel—let me go!"

"Not much!"

"Oh, help, help, help!"

"Stop that infernal noise!" cried Frank James, galloping up to the girl.

"Where do you intend to take me?" she asked.

"To the States."

"I don't want to go to the States."

"You must."

"Oh, I won't!"

"Silence, girl! There is no need for you to go to raising a rumpus. You are in for it," said Frank.

"So are you."

And she struck Frank James a blow on the face with her hand that stunned him, and flew into his hair in a way that was frightful as well as painful.

It was a fearful trial on Frank.

"Jade, wretched girl, I will kill you!"

"I don't care, I don't go back to the States, where they hang people."

Jesse James, at first inclined to laugh at his brother's predicament, saw that the situation was growing somewhat desperate, and as Frank was liable to draw his revolver and shoot the girl, he determined to interfere.

Seizing the girl's hand, he pulled her onto his own horse, and held her securely.

"Now, Minnie, unless you behave yourself better than you have done, I will tie you."

"You want to tie a rope about my neck and hang me," sobbed the poor child.

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. Now, no need of lyin' about it. Don't I know that everybody who is taken from No Man's Land is hung? That's why they take 'em to the States—to hang 'em."

Poor child, she had been reared among criminals and taught to regard law as nothing more than a persecution.

"I have other designs than to hang you, Minnie."

"What?"

"I am going to marry you."

"But I won't have you! I don't want you. I don't want to marry anybody."

"You will change your notion."

"No, I won't, I won't marry at all, so I won't! I want to go back to No Man's Land."

"Think, girl, when we are married we will be very rich. Oh, how rich we will be! You shall have your every wish gratified, and when you are dressed in silks and diamonds, you can go to the city and be a great lady."

"I don't want to go to the city, I don't want to be a great lady, neither, and I won't! No, I won't!"

"Keep silent, or I will tie a handkerchief over your mouth."

Minnie proved a refractory prisoner, and Jesse James, who for purposes of his own really had matrimonial intentions, found her a very unwilling bride to woo.

They went to a small settlement known as Briggs' Gulch.

Frank James complained of feeling ill and tired, and demanded rest.

"We will take her to old Ann Roberts and leave her there," said Jesse, "until we get ready to go on west."

"I am used up, Jess, and must have rest," said Frank.

Ann Roberts was an old, toothless crone who lived in a stone house with owls and a pet fox for her associates.

Her house had received the name of the rookery, and she was termed a witch.

At daylight one morning a horseman dismounted in front of her house and rapped on the door with the butt end of his pistol.

There came no answer.

He knocked louder, still no answer.

He thumped away with all his might.

Rap, rap, rap!

Surely every rap he gave on that door made it quake to the very centre.

At last an old shutter creaked on its rusty hinge, and the night-capped head of a withered hag was poked out. In a shrill, harsh voice she asked:

"Why don't yer git an ax?"

"Get up, Mother Ann."

"Wot yer want?"

"I want to come in, of course."

"Air that Jess?"

"Yes, mother."

"Wall, don't be so obstroperlous, an' I'll let yer in."

"Hurry."

"Oh, I'll take my time, never d' yer fear. I'm not one as is goin' ter break my neck, lem me tell yer, ter please anybody."

"I believe you, Ann."

"I'm comin'—oh, I'm comin'. I'll git thar directly, an' I ain't er goin' ter hurry."

"Come on up, Frank."

Frank James appeared, bearing the girl on his horse before him.

"Frank, has any one seen us?"

"I think not."

"Well, I certainly hope not."

"If they have, we will make it a sad day for them. Why don't the old witch hurry up? I am anxious to be going."

"Where are you going?" asked Frank.

"To the town. No one will know us here."

Frank maintained a sullen silence, and Jesse became uneasy about him. Frank James had spells of moroseness, and was subject to fits of hallucination amounting almost to insanity.

"I wonder if another such a spell is coming on as he had at Brashear, Missouri?" thought Jesse.

The old woman at last came to the door, and glaring at Jesse from her small, peculiar eyes, hissed:

"Wot d'yer want?"

"Here is a girl, Mother Ann, for you to take care of."

"She'll be a charge ter keep I hev," she chuckled.

"Yes, and see that you keep her well. Now, mind you, Ann, you are not to allow any one to see her."

"Oh, I won't."

"For your life keep her safe until we come."

"I will; but wot d'yer gin me?"

"We will give you ten thousand dollars."

She opened her eyes and gave expression to a grunt of pleased amazement.

"I mean just what I say. If you will keep here here safely for us until we return, you shall have ten thousand dollars."

"I'll do it or die!" was her answer.

Then they ushered the pale and speechless girl inside the house, and turning about, rode away.

The village near the Owl's Nest was one of those frontier towns where men are addicted to drinking and gambling, and all manner of habits of dissipation.

Jesse and Frank put up at the hotel, slept that night, and next morning, well disguised, went boldly about the town.

"Frank must have rest before we proceed eastward," thought Jesse.

Next night found both brothers in the saloon.

Amos Jefferson, a young man whose acquaintance Jesse had formed, and whom he had resolved to rob of his diamond pin and watch, was sitting at the table with them.

Champagne flowed freely, and under the sparkling wine all became hilarious.

"I will make him drunk, and then we can rob him at leisure."

Suddenly Frank James leaped from the table and pointing to his forehead, screamed in a most wild, hysterical manner.

"What's the matter?" Jesse asked.

"See, it is there—there!" cried Frank James, pointing to his forehead. "The bullet has gone through!"

"He is crazy!" gasped Jesse.

"He has gone mad!" gasped their companion.

Frank was seized and borne up to his room. All night long he raved, but toward morning he slept, and by noon was showing signs of recovery.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AROUND THE OWL'S NEST.

We left Oliver and the detective beaten back by men disguised as Indians, and their prisoners rescued.

Mr. Saunders felt his chagrin most keenly. He was almost white with rage, but his judgment controlled his anger.

"If they are Indians, I hope they may roast them!" he said, as soon as he could regain his wits.

"They are not Indians," his companion answered.

"Not?"

"No. I know they are not."

"Then what were they?"

"Some of those rascals from No Man's Land; perhaps some who professed friendship to us."

"Well, it's a mercy we are spared our lives. It's a wonder we were not shot down by them."

"It is, but we escaped safe and all right, and we must not let any grass grow under our feet now until we get back to No Man's Land."

"Why?"

"Have you forgotten?"

"The girl?"

"Yes."

"I had for the time being—I had forgotten her."

"You must not. She is to be kept from these wretches, and you are to take her east. There is a strange mystery about her, I don't know what it is, but she is worth millions."

"How are we to solve it?"

"I don't know."

They found their horses and went slowly and carefully up Per-simmon Creek, keeping a careful lookout for the enemy. The James Boys and their friends were quite revengeful, they knew, and they might even now be lying in wait to ambush them.

Jesse and Frank had been hurried away, as the reader already knows, and our friends found no obstruction in the way of an enemy.

They had not gone a mile, however, before they espied a light in the distance. The light for a few moments puzzled them, and they crept closer to it.

"It's a camp fire," Oliver whispered to his companion, when they had halted a few moments to listen and watch the light.

"Yes, and it may be the Indians."

"I think not: Let us creep nearer and see."

They tied their horses to trees, and then crept stealthily, peering through the woods.

A tall form could be seen moving about, but owing to the smoke they were not able to make it out.

Holding their guns in their hands, they crept on nearer and nearer to the scene.

"Hold on thar, yer tarnashun heethen! Wot in ther name o'

old Dan Tucker air yer a-pilin' on more wood fur, yer merhogany-faced dude?" cried a voice.

"Allee lite. Mellikan man no wantee no fire—belly well, me no makee any firee for Mellikan man," answered another voice.

"I don't want ter roast."

"Allee lite."

"Now, pick up that air infant cannon o' yourn an' turn its nozzle t'other way, for blame me ef I've any likin' o' hevin' it pintin' this way when I know thar's nine bullets in its barrel."

"Allee lite."

No use now to ask who the owners of that camp fire were, Oliver knew them well, and hurrying forward he called:

"Davy, Handsome Davy?"

"Wall, pilgrim, I'm right down mighty glad ter see yer!" said the old man. "We heered sounds ter-night like fightin', and I was a leetle mite skeered that yer mought a got rubbed out."

"We are untouched, Dave, but we were most disastrously defeated."

"Who war it?"

"Men from No Man's Land disguised as Indians."

"Wall, did yer floor any o' 'em?"

"No, I could have shot a dozen, but I refrained from shedding blood, if possible. But the greatest disaster to us was in the loss of our prisoners. We had Frank and Jesse James prisoners, and were going to take them to the States, but they were rescued."

"Wall, that war too bad!"

"Go runnee, takee back!" cried Lee Sing. "Me gittee gun, shotee, killee allee way aloud here."

Oliver, who was quick to interpret the Chinaman, said:

"No, Lee Sing, you must not now. We will get back to Claybank and see that the girl is protected."

"Still er thinkin' erbout that er' gal," growled Old Hoss, shaking his head. "Thar's suthin' strange whenever a young feller begins er talkin' all ther time erbout one sartin gal. Yer kin jist look out then that suthin' 'll turn up over it."

They hurried back to the village of Claybank, to learn that the unfortunate girl had been abducted and carried away by Frank and Jesse James.

On the fourth night after Minnie Potter's incarceration in the old stone house, four men were seen riding down the hill.

From her room in the attic the brave girl saw them. She would have waved her handkerchief to attract their attention, but for the fact that the window was barred on the inside with iron, and she was unable to approach it.

She gazed at them, and whispered:

"It's Oliver and his friends. Oh, it is Oliver and his friends! Oh, how I wish I could indicate by some signal that I am here, and bring them to my rescue."

But at this moment her old jailer entered, and her keen glance detected the flush of hope on the girl's cheek. One glimpse at the horsemen descending the hill, and she realized that there was great danger of losing her reward.

"Seizing the girl roughly by the arm, she cried:

"Come away from that winder!"

CHAPTER XXV.

MINNIE RESCUED.

The four horsemen slowly descended the great hill, and Oliver, drawing rein in front of the great old house, said:

"This is a singular old house, Mr. Saunders."

"It is, indeed."

"It was evidently built by the Mexicans."

"Guess it was."

Then the detective bent over in his saddle and whispered:

"Maybe you had better inquire at this house for the girl."

Oliver, who had thought of nothing save the rescue of Minnie Potter, determined to know at least who lived there.

He dismounted and rapped at the door.

No answer.

"Kick the blasted door down!" cried Old Hoss.

Oliver gave it a severe kick with his boot, and after alternate kicks and halloos, he at last managed to bring an old woman to the door.

"Wot yer want?" she demanded.

"Who lives here?"

"I do."

"Any one else?"

"No."

"Let us come in an' warm, old granny," said Handsome Davy, in a most comical manner. "Yer sich a lovely critter that I'm er mind ter fall in love wi' yer."

"Ef yer come erbout me, I'll scald yer eyes out wi' bilin' water."

They could get no information from the old hag, save it was six miles to town.

"Now, look ee hyar, pilgrim," said the man denominated as Old Hoss, or Handsome Davy, as they galloped down the road, "thar's suthin' very onmateril erbout that air old gal. She war a bit too anxious fur we fellers ter git erway. I jist tell yer wot I berlieve, an' that is that the old owl's nest 'll pay us to investigate."

"Now?" asked Oliver.

"No."

"When?"

"Ter-night. Move on, fur like ez not we'll find the Jeems Boys at ther town."

They hurried on at a gallop.

The sun had gone down, and shades of twilight were noiselessly falling o'er the earth when they came in sight of the village.

Two men were seen riding toward them at a gallop. But they passed below the surface of the hill and disappeared.

"That's strange!" said Oliver, when they had gained the top of the next hill without seeing them.

"I kin read it, pilgrim. Gone by another way round us."

"Why?"

"Bercause they didn't want ter meet us."

"It's suspicious," said Ike Saunders.

"They air the Jeems Boys, an' air gone back ter ther Owl's Nest, I'll bet a pint er lick."

"Then back to the Owl's Nest we go!" cried Oliver, his face evincing great excitement, and if possible even paler than before.

In a moment all three had wheeled their horses about and were galloping like madmen back toward the old house.

It was dark, and the owls which built their nests in the quaint old gables were hooting most dismally when Frank and Jesse James reached the old house.

"See, here they are—here they are?" cried Jesse, as four men burst into view around a corner.

Boom! went Lee Sing's gun, and the bullets whizzed like hail about the James Boys. The only harm done was to Lee himself, who was kicked off his horse.

Jesse told Frank to bring out the girl, while he held the enemy in check.

But he soon realized that that was utterly impossible. They were coming on him like a whirlwind, and Frank had only reached the door when he called him back:

"Away, Frank, away—mount and ride for your life!" he cried. "Better, far better, lose the girl than our lives!"

It was a great sacrifice, a great loss, when they imagined a fortune in their hands.

But the James Boys, mounting their horses, fled.

On, on, on until dawn of day, across prairies, over hills, through forests, by swamps, and swimming streams.

"This shall be my last ride in the West," said Jesse James. And he was correct, for it was in reality the bandit king's last ride.

Oliver Davis did not attempt to pursue the bandit.

He knew that Minnie was in the old stone house, and he determined to find her.

Leaping from his horse, he sprang at the door.

"Keep out—keep out!" roared the old hag, striking at him with a heavy iron rod.

"Away, woman!"

He seized a candle from a table, and dashed up a flight of stairs.

"Minnie, Minnie, Minnie!" he called.

There came from somewhere a smothered groan, and almost frantic he ran forward into a dark room. His speed extinguished his candle, but in a moment he had taken a match from his vest-pocket and relighted it.

There was Minnie tied in a chair, and a cruel gag in her mouth. To remove the gag was but the work of a moment.

"Minnie—Minnie, you are free!" he cried.

Old Hoss, the detective and Chinaman came into the room.

"Yes," said the detective, "and you shall be taken from this miserable country. You are not Whisky Pete's daughter, but the child of wealthy parents. I don't know who you are, but I have determined to fathom this mystery."

"It has already been done," said a strange voice to everybody. "The mystery of years has been solved, and the greatest revelation of the age is at hand."

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

Everybody looked about in amazement, fixing their eyes on Old Hoss, or Handsome Davy.

That individual removed his cap, and with it the grizzled wig, then he took off his beard, and to their great astonishment there stood before them a young man.

"I guess, friends, it's time to explain," he said, in excellent English, without any tinge of the border dialect he had used. "Old Hoss, or Handsome Davy, the linooal descendant o' the sweet singer o' Israel is no more, and in his place you see Lem Berkley, a New York detective. You ask what I have been about, and why I masqueraded in this way. Sit down, for my story is long and the revelation is startling."

Without a word everybody sat down, and all eyes were on the New York detective.

"My business here was to search for that girl. Her name is not Minnie Potter. Oliver Davis will remember that his mother was left a widow with two children. Oliver and a girl baby. Oliver was four years older than his sister. Now comes my story. Mrs. Davis was a Miss Greenslate in Ohio. Her father wanted her to marry Thomas Clarkson, the brother of Reuben Clarkson, the great oil king. Tom Clarkson was rich, but Joe Davis poor; but Davis was honest, and Tom a drinking, profligate sort of a fellow, and despite all parental authority, she married Davis. Davis died when the girl baby was only two months old, and Clarkson stole the infant from its mother, and then Tom Clarkson told her he knew where it was, and would restore it if she would marry him and say nothing about it.

"Everybody about Lima was astounded and shocked when the widow married Tom Clarkson before her husband had been three months buried. But they never knew the cause. Her child never was restored.

"Clarkson became cruel to the widow, who had some property left her by her grandfather, which was to descend to her and her girl child.

"The amount was over a million dollars. How Clarkson ever learned of it I do not know. Mrs. Davis never knew of it until recent years. Well, this boy," pointing to Oliver, "grew up and began to resent the insults a cruel step-father heaped on his mother, and one day shot the step-father dead."

"Did lite, allee-lite!" cried the Chinaman.

"Oliver fled to escape being hanged, for he knew that Reuben Clarkson, Tom's brother, was rich, and Mr. Saunders was employed to come here to capture Oliver, as you know."

"Yes, yes, but the girl—go on!"

"The girl baby was stolen by Old Pete Potter, taken to Kansas, and for years left with the herders, then Old Pete took her to No Man's Land, called her his own daughter, Minnie, and there she is."

"My sister, my sister!" cried Oliver, embracing the astonished Minnie.

"Now, gentlemen, I was two years ago engaged by a friend of Mrs. Davis to work up this case," continued Mr. Berkley, "and I have done so. I have all the evidence, and Mr. Oliver need have no fears of returning to Lima. Reuben Clarkson will have enough to do to defend himself of the crime of kidnaping. Minnie is a millionaire, and will be able to defend her brother for so nobly protecting their mother."

Our story is told. Minnie and her brother were restored to their mother. Oliver was tried and acquitted. The Chinaman is now in the Davis household, a trusted servant, who occasionally amuses himself with his big gun.

Minnie is in school, and Oliver is a rising young lawyer. Ike Saunders and Lew Berkley are partners in the detective business, and foremost in the land. They never tire of talking of their adventures with "The James Boys in No Man's Land," and "The Bandit King's Last Ride."

THE END.

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